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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 26 June 2019

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

*The Secretary of State was asked—
Leaving the EU: Manufacturing*

1. **Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect on manufacturing in Wales of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [911489]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): The manufacturing sector is of vital importance to the Welsh economy. The UK's modern industrial strategy plays a key part in supporting industry. We want to get a deal with the European Union to give a smooth and orderly exit.

Stephen Doughty: The Secretary of State says that he wants to get a deal, yet he is backing a candidate for the Conservative leadership who advocates no deal. With the news from Ford, Airbus, Honda and Nissan, and from so much of Welsh manufacturing industry and the steel industry, how on earth can he, as Secretary of State, justify that position? Or is he simply trying to keep his job?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman is highly selective in what he cites. If he hears the calls of some of the employers he mentioned, he will know that they supported the deal that came before Parliament and urged him to vote for a deal. By definition, his voting against the deal made no deal far more likely.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the opportunities for manufacturing in Wales when we leave the European Union will be to supply the rest of the United Kingdom with goods and services?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Manufacturing in Wales is more productive than the UK average, so is well placed to take the new opportunities both in the UK and globally that will arise as a result of our leaving the European Union. Like both leadership candidates, I would prefer to have a deal than not to have one.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): How many Welsh exporting manufacturers are moving workers to the EU27 to set up front offices, distribution centres and so forth, and what help are the Government giving them to export Welsh jobs?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for providing me with the opportunity to highlight the Welsh economy's export record. Exports are now at £17.7 billion—that is a 7.5% increase, which highlights how the Welsh economy is exporting strongly and at record levels.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As someone who started his working life at Ford in Bridgend, may I ask the Secretary of State what he is doing to ensure that high-quality, high-value manufacturing jobs are going to continue at that excellent site, which has such good rail and road connections?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my hon. Friend; with his local knowledge, having worked at the plant, he truly understands the value of the skills that the people there bring. Those skills are a real incentive to attract further investment. Along with the Welsh Government, we have set up a joint taskforce that will be led by Richard Parry-Jones, an industry expert who is best placed to make recommendations to the Government. We look forward to receiving that report shortly.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Given the almost daily news of business closures in Wales as a result of Brexit uncertainty, and the real prospect of no deal, how can the Secretary of State justify his support for a candidate to be Prime Minister who is prepared to sacrifice thousands of manufacturing jobs in Wales to further his own personal ambition? Does the Secretary of State think it is a “do or die” Brexit?

Alun Cairns: I am disappointed that the hon. Lady looks to undermine the Welsh economy. She needs to recognise that unemployment is at record low levels, economic activity is at record high levels, exports are growing and manufacturing is prospering. When it comes to Brexit, she also needs to recognise that when she voted against the deal on 29 March, she was the one who increased the prospect of no deal.

Christina Rees: The last thing I would do is undermine Wales. I am proud of my country and I am proud to have represented Wales many times. When you pull on that red jersey, Mr Speaker, there is nothing like it.

I will try again: given the Secretary of State's apparent support for a no-deal Brexit as a price worth paying to keep his own job, what can he possibly say to people in Wales who stand to lose their manufacturing jobs as a result of his Government's catastrophic mishandling of the Brexit negotiations?

Alun Cairns: I highlight the fact that manufacturing is doing well in the Welsh economy, with 12,000 more manufacturing jobs in the economy now than there were in 2010. There are now 4,000 more manufacturing jobs in the Welsh economy than there were last year. Manufacturing employers would like to see a deal with

the European Union; perhaps the hon. Lady should explain why she has voted against a deal with the European Union. Furthermore, she needs to explain why she is rejecting the will of the Welsh people, who voted in stronger numbers than the UK average to leave the European Union.

EU Withdrawal Agreement: Welsh Economy

2. Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect on the Welsh economy of the withdrawal agreement on the future relationship between the UK and the EU. [911490]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): The Government are clear that the best outcome for Wales and the Welsh economy is that the UK leaves the European Union in an orderly manner with a deal. That is why I voted for one on three separate occasions.

Geraint Davies: The Secretary of State knows that, if we stay within the EU, British people will get a 20% uplift in structural funding to £440 per person. Will he ensure that, in the event of our leaving with a deal, that money is sustained completely with a new UK prosperity fund? If we have a no-deal outcome, there will, quite simply, be no structural funding and we will hit a cliff edge, and more firms like Tata, Airbus and Ford will leave on his watch.

Alun Cairns: I do not recognise any of the hon. Gentleman's comments. Let me ask him this one question: does he recognise that Swansea voted to leave the European Union in higher numbers than the national average, and, if so, why does he reject the will of his constituents?

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Many Welsh businesses will be able to cope with a no-deal Brexit, but one sector that the Secretary of State and I know will not be able to cope is sheep farming. Will he confirm whether he has had any discussions with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about an income protection measure or a compensation package for hill farmers when their industry gets decimated under a no-deal Brexit?

Alun Cairns: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely important point and highlights the importance of the agriculture sector, specifically sheep farming, to the Welsh economy. Clearly, it is our will to protect that sector in every possible way that we can, but the best way to protect it is to get a deal with the European Union. I have voted on three separate occasions for the deal. I think that Opposition Members need to explain why they have voted against a deal, because, by definition, that creates a higher chance of our leaving the European Union without a deal. They would need to explain that to their constituents.

12. [911500] Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, I met a managing director of a local manufacturing company who imports most of his goods through ports. He is stockpiling raw material at the moment, which is affecting his cash flow and his future plans. The Secretary of State went to Holyhead in April and spoke about the importance of ports,

saying that we needed a deal. Now he has said recently that we need to prepare for no deal. I must tell him that his comments have deeply concerned that chief executive officer. If we do end up with a no deal, what would he say to him?

Alun Cairns: I want a deal with the European Union. I have voted for a deal with the European Union on three separate occasions. I suspect that the employer to whom the hon. Gentleman has spoken would have supported a deal with the European Union. Perhaps he should have explained why he voted against that, because that has clearly increased the uncertainty, which is not good for anyone. He needs to look at himself and his colleagues and consider why they voted to block the deal.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Along with the Secretary of State, I supported the withdrawal agreement the three times it came before Parliament because of the impact that it will have on my constituency, and particularly on the sheep farming industry. Will the Secretary of State go to the Royal Welsh show and explain to the farming unions that he, I and both of the candidates who might be Prime Minister are very supportive of reaching a deal with the European Union that will protect the future of my constituency and the sheep farming industry in particular?

Alun Cairns: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his strong record in this area. Yes, I am looking forward to my visit to the Royal Welsh show. That will give me an opportunity to continue my ongoing proactive dialogue with the agriculture sector and with the farming unions in particular. I have spoken to both leadership candidates, and both recognise the importance of agriculture to the UK economy and the significance of the agriculture sector in Wales. They believe that it is best to leave the European Union with a deal, but will take positive steps to protect those industries in the absence of a deal.

14. [911502] John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): Brexit has serious implications for Welsh farmers, with an average of 80% of a farmer's income in Wales coming from direct payments received through the EU's common agricultural policy. The Secretary of State is backing a contender for Prime Minister who, during the referendum campaign, promised farmers that their subsidies would remain as they are after Brexit. Can the Secretary of State give a guarantee that the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) will not pursue any Brexit policy that harms the lives and the livelihoods of farmers and that impacts on agriculture?

Alun Cairns: I am excited about our prospects outside the European Union—clearly having had the privilege of travelling internationally. A deal on beef exports was agreed last week between China and the UK, and we continue our dialogues in relation to other products and foodstuffs. That demonstrates the markets that are available. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that it is better to get a deal with the European Union, because that would give us a smooth and orderly exit, but if he will continually vote against the deal with the European Union, by definition he will increase the chances of a no deal.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Secretary of State is easy about a no-deal Brexit, which threatens to create a perfect storm for sheep farmers in Wales—and his Government are going to have to own it. Tariffs of 46% are set to kick in on 31 October, to coincide exactly with the season when mountain lambs come to market for export. There is a mart in Bala on 31 October. Will he join me there and tell farmers to their face why the value of their lambs has gone through the floor?

Alun Cairns: I remind the right hon. Lady that farming unions in Wales strongly supported the deal agreed by the Prime Minister and the European Commission. Would she stand at their mart, look them in the eye and tell them that she voted against their wishes and for a no-deal position? That is exactly what she did on three separate occasions.

Liz Saville Roberts: So that is the Secretary of State failing to take responsibility, then. He talks up the threadbare benefits of his insular Union while denigrating the real rewards of the European Union. The majority of Tory party members would sacrifice the United Kingdom for Brexit. Will he therefore tell me which is closest to his heart—his beloved Brexit, on which his career depends, or his precious Union?

Alun Cairns: There is no doubt that Wales prospers fantastically through being part of the United Kingdom, and there are great opportunities for the United Kingdom outside the European Union. I want to maintain a very close trading relationship with the European Union, which is why I would strongly prefer to have a deal. As a passionate Welsh lady, the right hon. Lady will recognise that Wales voted to leave the European Union. We are trying to honour the outcome of the referendum and maintain a close trading relationship so that farmers, manufacturers and service providers in Wales can continue to trade with the European Union and globally.

Industrial Strategy

3. **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Welsh Government on the effect of the industrial strategy on the Welsh economy. [911491]

4. **Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Welsh Government on the effect of the industrial strategy on the Welsh economy. [911492]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): We continue to work closely with colleagues across both the UK and Welsh Governments to ensure that the industrial strategy continues to deliver for Wales. We have already made funding available for a number of projects for Wales, including recently providing a further £1.4 million to support innovative battery technology through the Faraday battery challenge.

Liz McInnes: Will the Minister confirm that by refusing to invest in major opportunities such as the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, the UK Government are denying the Welsh steel industry a significant opportunity to innovate and create quality jobs that would support a new industry with global growth potential?

Kevin Foster: I am afraid I do not recognise that description, given that the National Infrastructure Commission supported our decision. It is worth noting that the tidal lagoon project would be three times more expensive at producing electricity than other alternatives.

Ian Mearns: In the light of the very concerning news about the number of jobs that could be lost at the Ford engine plant in Bridgend, and reports of the impact that similar announcements by Nissan in my region and Honda will have on the supply chain companies in Wales, what assessment has the Minister made of the impact that Brexit is already having on the automotive sector in Wales? What discussions has he had with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to provide support to the sector in Wales via the industrial strategy?

Kevin Foster: It is worth saying that Ford has said that the decision is not linked to Brexit; if Opposition Members are interested in the views of Ford, it said to vote for the deal on Friday 29 March. Let me be clear that there is positive news. Only this month, Aston Martin started production of a new line of vehicles in St Athan in south Wales—in the Secretary of State's constituency. That shows what can be done when there is positive work on behalf of local people.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): The design of the shared prosperity fund will be crucial to Wales's industrial strategy. Communities and business shareholders are clear on what the fund should look like—not a penny less, nor a power lost for Wales. The consultation on the fund was in the 2017 Conservative manifesto, and was mentioned in a written statement in July last year and by the Secretary of State at the Dispatch Box last October. Can the Minister confirm that this consultation has now been withdrawn?

Kevin Foster: We continue to work on the shape of the UK shared prosperity fund that will come forward after Britain leaves the European Union. We look forward to providing more information in the spending review later this year.

Infrastructure Resilience

5. **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the resilience of infrastructure in Wales. [911493]

10. **Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the resilience of infrastructure in Wales. [911498]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): We have regular discussions with the Welsh Government's Minister for Economy and Transport on a range of matters, including infrastructure in Wales. We are committed to ensuring that Wales prospers on the back of a strong and resilient infrastructure base, supported through our modern industrial strategy and national infrastructure delivery plan.

Chris Bryant: The Assembly Government have good plans for the Treherbert line, which serves Rhondda Fawr, but people who live in Rhondda Fach and at the

top of Rhondda Fawr who need to go over the Rhigos road to get to work, or indeed to the maternity unit at Prince Charles Hospital, need significant investment in the roads. It must surely be unfair that it takes many people in Rhondda, including expectant mothers, four buses to get the hospital, which might mean that a woman would not get there in time to deliver safely and that babies might not live.

Kevin Foster: I recognise the strength with which the hon. Gentleman has put forward his constituents' case. Roads and highways are obviously in the devolved space, but I would certainly be more than happy to meet him to discuss what we can do to support his cause.

Wayne David: The European regional development fund has made a huge contribution to the development of infrastructure in Wales. Will the Minister give a commitment that resources from the new shared prosperity fund will be allocated on the basis of need and not through competition?

Kevin Foster: We will decide on the future of the UK shared prosperity fund, which I touched on earlier, through consultation and through the comprehensive spending review later this year. What would make a huge difference to roads in south Wales would be getting the M4 relief road back on track. If that was our decision, Wales would now be on the highway to the future; sadly, as it is a devolved one, it is now on the road to nowhere.

9. [911497] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): Two years ago, there was no broadband at all in the Dysynni valley in Gwynedd, in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts). Now, there is fibre going direct to premises, delivering a minimum of 75 megabits per second download. What more can the United Kingdom Government do to deliver high-speed broadband to rural Welsh businesses?

Kevin Foster: At the autumn Budget, we announced £200 million for the hardest to reach areas, and Wales will be included in the first phase of this work. Tomorrow, I will be in Wales with my counterpart in the Welsh Government talking about the north Wales growth deal, and digital connectivity is a key part of that. In addition to the funds in the growth deal, there will be £8 million from the local full fibre networks challenge fund to support increased connectivity.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): Ports infrastructure is essential to the economy of Wales and the United Kingdom. Holyhead port is a gateway from the Republic of Ireland. What discussions has the Minister's Department had with the Irish Government to ensure that there are adequate facilities in place before Brexit, because the Irish Government are planning to detour freight direct to mainland Europe?

Kevin Foster: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that there are ongoing discussions with the Irish Government to ensure that whatever scenario there is for Brexit, there will not be so much disruption at Holyhead. He will also be pleased to note that potential investment in Holyhead port is part of the north Wales growth deal, which I will be discussing tomorrow.

Steel Producers

6. **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What recent steps the Government have taken to support steel producers in Wales. [911494]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): The Government are extremely supportive of the Welsh steel sector. Since the European Commission blocked the Thyssenkrupp joint venture, I have met unions and management to discuss the challenges and opportunities.

Tom Pursglove: As well as the success of the industrial strategy in supporting UK steel making, and the adoption of the new UK steel charter, what more can we do to support and promote the whole UK steel supply chain through the GREAT Britain campaign?

Alun Cairns: I again pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his role in supporting the steel sector in Corby. He will be well aware that five major steel producers have come together on this. In addition, the Government are supporting a sustained manufacturing hub led by Swansea University that will not only be of direct benefit to the steel industry in Wales but will have a significant impact on the steel sector in his constituency. That demonstrates the great strength of the industrial strategy.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Tata's Cogent Power in my constituency has huge potential to develop electrical steel in the automotive industry and electrification, but it needs Government support to help to develop the supply chain, which I wrote to the Secretary of State about recently. Will he come and see for himself by visiting the Orb plant?

Alun Cairns: I would be happy to support the hon. Lady and Orb in Newport. It is an important site that employs 350 people. As the manufacturing sector is doing well in Wales, I think there is a great future for the plant.

Ford in Bridgend: Welsh Economy

7. **Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): With reference to the closure of the Ford plant in Bridgend, what assessment he has made of the strength of the Welsh economy. [911495]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I am extremely disappointed with Ford's intention to close its Bridgend plant in 2020. However, this bad news is not a reflection of the Welsh economy as a whole.

Karin Smyth: No wonder the Secretary of State does not want to answer the question, because the Government are being totally complacent. I have no doubt that the closure of the Ford plant in Bridgend will have huge consequences along the M4 corridor, damaging our economy, including in Bristol South. Just when will we see the start of any kind of industrial strategy? Right now, with continued closures and the impact of this closure on the supply chain, we are going backward, not forward, and that damages the economy in Bristol South.

Alun Cairns: The manufacturing sector is extremely important to the UK economy and Wales specifically. There are 4,000 more manufacturing jobs in the Welsh

economy now than there were this time last year, but that is not to undermine the importance of those Ford jobs. The Welsh Government and I are working closely together. We have commissioned Richard Parry-Jones to come up with recommendations on how we can best promote the plant, but I am encouraged by the early discussions we have had with potential investors. Some of those discussions are more mature than others, but the hon. Lady should recognise that they are private and confidential at this stage.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I join the Secretary of State and the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) in their deep disappointment at the closure of the Ford factory in Bridgend. Does he agree that there is huge potential on the M4 corridor for the development of electric cars and automotive technology of all kinds, right down as far as my constituency in Wiltshire?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. The UK's industrial strategy has invested £1.5 billion in automotive research and development, to ensure that we maximise the opportunities of the shift from petrol and diesel engines to electric vehicles. A great demonstration of the success of that is that 20% of electric vehicles sold in Europe are manufactured here in the UK.

Former Phurnacite Works, Abercwmboi

8. **Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits of redeveloping the former Phurnacite works in Abercwmboi; and if he will make a statement. [911496]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I pay tribute to the right hon. Lady for the proactive approach she is taking to redeveloping this site, which has been an outstanding issue for decades. I was pleased that we were able to bring together the current owners of the site with her to come up with a positive plan for the future.

Ann Clwyd: I thank the Secretary of State for coming to the area and knocking heads together in a way that we have waited for for 30 years. The people of Abercwmboi have lived in dirt and dust on the site of what was the worst industrial polluter in the whole of Britain. I am grateful for the interest he has taken and the way he has managed to knock heads together.

Alun Cairns: I pay tribute to the right hon. Lady, who has highlighted this issue for some time. I am keen to work closely with her to bring the landowners together and see what plans can be made. The local authority is playing a key part. We need to establish a clear plan of action, and we are well on our way to delivering that.

Mid-Wales Growth Deal

11. **Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): What recent discussions he has had with (a) businesses, (b) local authorities and (c) representative groups on the mid-Wales growth deal. [911499]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the constructive approach he has taken to working with all partners involved in the mid-Wales growth deal. My ministerial colleague in the other place has undertaken

extensive engagement with local authorities and the private sector in mid-Wales, most recently at Welshpool on 26 May 2019.

Ben Lake: The University of Aberystwyth and the internationally acclaimed Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences—IBERS—are both key partners in the mid-Wales growth deal, and the facilities at the new Gogerddan innovation campus will cement their place as leaders in the areas of agri-food and biotechnology and allow the area to become a centre for expertise in controlled environment agriculture and vertical farming. The benefits that this would bring to agriculture are significant, but rather than take my word for it will the Minister visit the Gogerddan campus so that he can see for himself the world-leading research being undertaken in Ceredigion?

Kevin Foster: That is certainly an invite any Wales Office Minister would find hard to refuse; we will try to co-ordinate. It is vital that the mid-Wales growth deal focuses on sectors such as agri-tech, where there is a significant opportunity to introduce transformational economic change. We encourage our partners to work closely with research institutions such as IBERS to put together a compelling case to both Governments.

13. [911501] **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): Given that a western rail link to Heathrow would connect south Wales stations such as Swansea, Cardiff and Newport directly to Heathrow, cutting up to half an hour off journey times, and mean London and south Wales would be better connected, benefiting businesses, tourists and the Welsh economy—

Mr Speaker: Order. Blur it out, man!

Mr Dhesi: What representations has the Secretary of State personally made to the Chancellor and the Department for Transport to support this scheme?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman was meant to say “Question 13”, but he was so overcome with excitement that he neglected to do so. Never mind. We will take it as part of Question 11.

Kevin Foster: As the hon. Gentleman will know, I am quite a fan of the potential benefits of the western rail access to Heathrow, which could unlock more growth and opportunities across the area served by Great Western. Regular representations are made, and I am sure the Chancellor, who is now on the Front Bench, will have heard those the hon. Gentleman has just made.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The reality, with the potential closure, is 1,700 jobs gone at Ford and between 6,000 and 7,000 in the supply chain. It is no good the Secretary of State saying manufacturing is buoyant, with all these potential job losses coming. We need economic stimulus packages from the UK Government in support of the Welsh Government. What is the Minister going to do about it to protect these jobs?

Kevin Foster: The Government are active in ensuring economic development in Wales, but the hon. Gentleman may wish to reflect on what was said by a Welsh Government Minister yesterday in relation to how they know what is going on.

Assembly Members: Diplomatic Support

15. Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on diplomatic support for Assembly Members. [911503]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): The UK Government's extensive network of diplomatic staff regularly provides support to Welsh Ministers for overseas visits relating to devolved matters. However, we will not support activities intended to undermine the United Kingdom.

Carol Monaghan: Earlier this month, the Foreign Office blocked diplomatic assistance to the First Ministers of Wales and Scotland. In the light of this action, which was an affront to our democratically elected First Ministers, can the Secretary of State explain how this United Kingdom is a partnership of equals?

Kevin Foster: We will always provide the extensive network of FCO posts abroad and the good offices of the Department for International Trade to support representations from devolved areas, but we will be a platform for the success of Wales, not for separatism in Scotland.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman, who is proudly sporting a "Free Nazanin" badge, accompanied by many colleagues.

Ian C. Lucas: I received excellent support from the diplomatic service abroad when I was the shadow Middle East Minister. May I commend the diplomatic service for working closely with all elected Members of Parliament, the Assemblies and the Scottish Parliament to preserve the integrity and strength of the United Kingdom?

Kevin Foster: I am pleased to hear about the hon. Gentleman's experience. As I have said, we will always look to provide support to promote the success of Wales and the success of this United Kingdom, but not to undermine it.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked— **Engagements**

Q1. [911574] Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 26 June.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in wishing the England football team the very best for their game against Norway tomorrow.

This morning, my office hosted a reception to mark Armed Forces Reserves Day, and this coming Saturday, we celebrate Armed Forces Day. This is an opportunity for us all to pay tribute to our servicemen and women here and around the world for their dedication and service and to those who have served in previous generations.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. Later today, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and I will travel to Japan for the G20 leaders summit. With the threat of climate change putting future generations at risk, vile terrorist propaganda continuing to spread online and rising tensions in the Gulf, this summit is an opportunity to address global challenges affecting all our nations.

Thangam Debbonaire: As the thousands of people demonstrating outside would tell the Prime Minister, tackling climate change and biodiversity makes the world safer, more beautiful and sustainable for our children and grandchildren. Does she agree that one of the first acts of the next Prime Minister should be—urgently—to introduce a new environment and climate change Bill putting into place all the recommendations of the Committee on Climate Change to meet net carbon zero, making the world a more beautiful place?

The Prime Minister: We are introducing an environment Bill as a Government. We have introduced a 25-year environment plan—I think the first time any Government have done that. We have committed to net zero emissions by 2050. That has gone through this House, but the question the hon. Lady needs to think about is, why is the Labour party in the House of Lords trying to block the net zero 2050 legislation?

Q5. [911578] Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): One of the biggest restraints on what is a very positive economy in York and North Yorkshire is the lack of progress on devolution. Following the rejection of the One Yorkshire proposal, does the Prime Minister agree that we need a more local approach, such as a York and North Yorkshire deal to rival those of the big urban centres?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely recognise, as we do across the Government, Yorkshire's enthusiasm for and dedication to devolution and the potential seen there for harnessing local people's sense of identity with Yorkshire. We share the ambition of doing what is best for Yorkshire, its people and its businesses. My right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary has now met Yorkshire leaders. Discussions are continuing about a different localist approach to devolution, and officials are having initial meetings with councils, including York, and will be interested in hearing their ambitions for devolution.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I hope the whole House will welcome today's mass climate lobby, which is coming to Parliament. We should be proud of it. This House, after all, became the first Parliament in the world to declare a climate emergency. I want to pay tribute to the young people and young climate strikers who have done so much to raise awareness of this issue. I hope Members will take the chance today to meet those who are coming to lobby and learn from them, because they feel very passionately on the issue.

I acknowledge that it is Armed Forces Day—celebrations are going on this week—and I think we should be concerned about the welfare of both serving and former serving members of our armed forces.

I join the Prime Minister in congratulating the Lionesses on reaching the quarter finals of the women's World cup and wish them well tomorrow night against Norway.

I welcome the judgment of the Court of Appeal last Thursday against UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia. The Court found that the Government had

“made no concluded assessments of whether the Saudi-led coalition had committed violations of international humanitarian law... during the Yemen conflict, and made no attempt to do so”.

Does the Prime Minister dispute that finding?

The Prime Minister: We continue to operate one of the most robust arms export control regimes in the world and we take our responsibilities on arms export licensing very seriously. Indeed, in the words of the 2017 judgment, the Government engaged in

“anxious scrutiny—indeed, at what seems like anguished scrutiny at some stages”.

We are disappointed that the Court found against the Government on one ground, and we will be seeking permission to appeal this judgment.

Jeremy Corbyn: Germany, as an EU member state, has banned arms exports to Saudi Arabia, so has Denmark, and both the US Senate and House of Representatives have voted to ban arms exports as well.

The UN describes the situation in Yemen as “humanity’s biggest preventable disaster”, but the Government see fit to continue selling arms to Saudi Arabia, so may I ask the Prime Minister a very simple question? Does she believe there are serious ongoing violations of international humanitarian law by Saudi Arabia in Yemen—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman knows very well that we consider these issues very carefully when we are dealing with these arms export licences, as has just been quoted by the Court, but he references the situation in Yemen. This cannot go on. We need a political settlement in Yemen.

I would remind the right hon. Gentleman that the Saudi-led intervention was at the request of the legitimate President of Yemen following a rebel insurgency, which overthrew the internationally recognised Government, and the intervention has been acknowledged by the United Nations. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary held a Yemen Quad meeting on Saturday, expressing concerns at escalating tensions, but what do we see the Labour party do? One of the right hon. Gentleman’s MPs was inviting rebel leaders of the insurgency into the House of Commons—yet again, Labour on the wrong side of the argument.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister does not appear to understand the depth of feeling at the UN, Parliaments around the world or even the US Senate and the House. The UN itself has warned that by the end of 2019, if the war continues, 230,000 people will have lost their lives, of whom 140,000 are children under the age of five. The UK and EU law state that the Government must

“not grant a licence if there is a clear risk that the items used might be used in the commission of a serious violation of international humanitarian law.”

The Government said they had used the following criteria to judge

“an understanding of Saudi military procedures; continuing engagement with the Saudis at the highest level”

and

“Saudi public commitments to IHL”.—[*Official Report*, 20 June 2019; Vol. 662, c. 375-6.]

If the Saudi Government say they are respecting human rights, do we then ignore all evidence on the ground in Yemen and continue to sell weapons to the regime, which has led to this appalling death toll already in this conflict?

The Prime Minister: First, as I have made clear, we are seeking permission to appeal the recent judgment. The judgment is not about whether the Government made the right or wrong decisions, but about the decision-making process and whether it was rational. We are considering the implications of the judgment, alongside seeking permission to appeal, and while we do that we will not grant any new licences for exports to Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners that might be used in the conflict in Yemen. The right hon. Gentleman talks about the conflict in Yemen. As I have just said, let us remember what happened and why we are seeing this conflict in Yemen: it was the overthrow of the internationally recognised Government by rebel insurgents. We are all concerned about the humanitarian situation in Yemen. [*Interruption.*] The shadow Foreign Secretary might like, as this is an area of concern to her remit, to actually listen to what the Government are doing. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The questions must be heard and the answers must be heard.

The Prime Minister: We are all concerned about the humanitarian situation in Yemen. That is why, since the start of the conflict in 2015, our total commitment to Yemen now stands at £770 million. We are one of the major contributors to support for the humanitarian effort. Ultimately, the only way to resolve this issue is through a political settlement. That is why we are supporting the efforts of the UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths.

Jeremy Corbyn: If that is the case, why are the Government appealing the judgment instead of promoting a peace settlement in Yemen? Since 2016, for three years, UN experts have been saying that the Saudi coalition has violated international humanitarian law in Yemen. This air campaign has killed tens of thousands of people, and injured and displaced many more. The Government say:

“there can be no military solution to this particular conflict. There can only be a negotiated and political solution.”—[*Official Report*, 20 June 2019; Vol. 662, c. 380.]

If that is the case, why have they already pumped £4.6 billion of military equipment into this brutal bombardment?

The Prime Minister: What we do believe, as I have just said—I said it in answer to the right hon. Gentleman’s last question and I said it, I think, in answer to his first question—is that the only way to ensure the security and stability of Yemen for the future is through a political settlement. That is why this Government are supporting the work being done by the UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths, and that is why we are continuing to use our diplomatic efforts, including, as I said, the Foreign Secretary holding a Yemen Quad on Saturday to encourage others around the table. We are very clear that we support the efforts to secure the agreement by the parties to the conflict to implement the Stockholm

agreements. That is an important part of the process leading to peace and a political solution. That work is essential so that progress can be made at the next round of these talks and so that the humanitarian supply lines can be opened up.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Trade Secretary said there could not be a military solution to this conflict. Surely the Government should think on this and stop the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia. Just last week, the UN special rapporteur, Agnes Kalamar, said that there is credible evidence that the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and other high-level officials are personally responsible for the horrific murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Does the Prime Minister accept that assessment?

The Prime Minister: We do want to see accountability for this horrific murder. I raised the death of Jamal Khashoggi with King Salman at the Sharm summit—the second time I have done so. I raised it with the Crown Prince at the G20 last year. I have stressed the importance of those responsible being held to account and of due process being followed. We expect Saudi Arabia to take the action necessary to ensure that such violations of international and national laws cannot happen again. The right direction—the right way—to take this is through a judicial process, and we are obviously closely following the continuing investigation. We expect it to proceed in line with internationally recognised legal standards.

Jeremy Corbyn: There is overwhelming evidence that war crimes are being committed in Yemen by Saudi Arabian forces—a state that flouts every human rights norm at home and abroad. Its Government believes that it can kill with impunity journalists or civil rights campaigners, Yemenis or Bahrainis. It funds extremism around the world, but the UK has supplied it with over £4.5 billion-worth of deadly weapons. UK weapons have been used in indiscriminate attacks on civilians in which over 200,000 people have been killed, and hundreds of thousands more stand on the brink of famine, starvation and death from wholly preventable diseases. Surely the Court of Appeal judgment should be a wake-up call to the Prime Minister and the Government. Instead of appealing the judgment, why not accept it, stop arms sales to Saudi Arabia now, bring about peace in the Yemen and save those lives?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman says to me, “bring about peace in the Yemen”. That is exactly what we are working with our international partners to do through the United Nations and the Yemen Quad. He talks about our relations with Saudi Arabia. That relationship has saved lives of British citizens in the past, but let us look at some of the relationships the right hon. Gentleman supports. When people were killed in Salisbury, his sympathies were with Russia. When terrorists were killing our people, his sympathies were with the IRA. And in the recent tanker attacks in the Gulf, his sympathies were with Iran. He never backs Britain and he should never be Prime Minister.

Q6. [911580] **Ben Bradley** (Mansfield) (Con): I am a firm believer that youth work is part of the answer to so many issues in our society and has a huge role to play in my constituency, but we are currently at risk of losing vital youth work qualifications. The review of

those qualifications was announced on 1 April, but funding has been delayed in the system. If it is not secured, we are in danger of seeing universities and colleges drop the qualifications from 2020, so will my right hon. Friend ensure that the funding is signed off immediately and we can continue to train amazing youth workers?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue, including the importance of the proper training of youth workers. We are absolutely committed to a properly qualified and trained youth sector. Subject to a business case, we have committed to renewing funding for these qualifications and reviewing the youth work curriculum. I know that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is in very close contact with the National Youth Agency, is aware of the timing issues and hopes to make an announcement in the near future.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks about reservists?

I am happy to be sporting a badge today in support of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. I hope that in the days that the Prime Minister has left in office, she will do what she can to secure Nazanin's release from jail in Iran.

I hope the Prime Minister will join many of us outside Parliament today in support of the climate justice activists. I have to say to the Leader of the Opposition that the Scottish Government were the first Government in the UK to declare a climate emergency; I hope that the UK responds to the leadership that Scotland is giving on this issue.

“Do or die, come what may”—those are the words of the Prime Minister's likely successor. The truth behind the Brexit chaos in the Tory party is encompassed in those words. The Tory dream is to drag us out of the European Union, no matter what the cost. Prime Minister, before you exit office, will you pledge never to vote for a successor willing to impose a devastating no-deal Brexit on all of us?

The Prime Minister: I have to remind the right hon. Gentleman—yet again—that he is due to ask me questions about my responsibilities as Prime Minister. I remind him—yet again—that as Prime Minister I voted three times in this House to ensure that we could take the UK out of the European Union with a deal that was good for the whole of the United Kingdom, and he voted effectively for no deal.

Ian Blackford: My goodness, it is no wonder she is leaving. That was no answer to the question. The Prime Minister is showing gross cowardice. On the one hand, the Tories are asking people to put their faith in the most incompetent Foreign Secretary in a century—a man who has made a career out of lying, and who has spent the week avoiding the media, staging photos and playing to the extreme delusions of the Tory shires. On the other hand, we have the most incompetent Health Secretary in our history, a man who writes books on privatising our NHS. [Interruption.] The Conservatives clearly do not like the truth. Someone so desperate for a chance at his 30-year Downing Street fantasy that he—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the right hon. Gentleman has concluded his inquiry. *[Interruption.]* Order. If he has not, he needs to do so in a single sentence. *[Interruption.]* Order! Mr Cowan, I am sure you are a well-intentioned fellow, but I require no counsel from you. One sentence—we have a lot of questions to get through.

Ian Blackford: In the Prime Minister's last days in office, will she finally act in the best interests of these islands, not of the Conservative party, and admit that neither of the candidates for office should ever be elected Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that either of the candidates for this high office would do a darned sight better job than anybody sitting on the Opposition Benches.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con) *rose—*

Hon. Members: More!

Sarah Newton: Seldom have I had such a welcome in this House. I have to do this more often.

I very much welcome the announcements that the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions made yesterday. Will the Prime Minister update the House on those plans, and how she feels that they will enable more people living with disabilities and health conditions to play their full part in our society?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for the work she did as Minister for disabled people; she did a lot of the ground work for the announcement that we were able to make on the disability strategy. Many disabled people in our society would love to be able to get into the workplace. One of the key issues underpinning that strategy is support to enable people to take their full role in society, to get into the workplace, and to ensure that they have access to the support that they need. I am very proud of the fact that about 950,000 more disabled people are now in the workplace, thanks to the actions of Conservatives in government. There is more for us to do; the disability strategy sets our path to do that, and to enable disabled people to play their full role in our society.

Q2. [911575] **Caroline Flint** (Don Valley) (Lab): Almost every infrastructure project across the UK requires British-made steel. The contracts for the next five years alone are worth £1 billion, but UK Steel and members of the Community trade union were yesterday asking me whether the Scunthorpe steelworks will still be working in five days' time. Will the Prime Minister guarantee that, a month from now, before she leaves office, the Scunthorpe steelworks will still be open?

The Prime Minister: We are concerned about the situation relating to the Scunthorpe works and British Steel, which is why my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary is actively engaging with the official receiver. Obviously, the official receiver has responsibility in relation to this matter, but we are doing all that we can, as a Government. I was pleased to meet—as the right hon. Lady knows—a number of Members of Parliament who have steel interests in their constituencies to talk

about the real impact that the closure of the works would have on people, and it is because of that impact that we are working so actively to try to ensure that we can retain employment in the area.

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): I am due to give birth any day now. I am hoping that there will not be an emergency in the Commons! *[Laughter.]* May I put on record my thanks to you, Mr Speaker, to the former Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), to the Government and to cross-party MPs who have delivered the proxy voting scheme, which will enable my constituents to be represented during my maternity leave?

Eleven-year-old Ruby Lloyd, who is at Hook-with-Warsash primary school, is campaigning for a pedestrian crossing in Warsash Road to encourage more pupils to walk to school, thereby improving road safety and air quality. Hundreds of local residents support her campaign, as do her headmistress and her councillors. Will my right hon. Friend get behind Ruby's campaign for safer roads in Fareham?

The Prime Minister: We wish my hon. Friend the very best for the upcoming birth. I feel a certain satisfaction, having played a little role in ensuring that she and her husband got married, as she has acknowledged.

As for my hon. Friend's point about Ruby, it is very good to see young people caring passionately about their local area and campaigning for it, and it is vital that children go to school in a safe environment. This is, of course, an issue for the local authority, but I wish Ruby the very best for her campaign.

Q3. [911576] **Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): Universal credit is causing great hardship in my constituency. It is driving up debt and increasing food bank use. It is making people who are out of work worse off, and making people who are in work worse off. In her final weeks in office, will the Prime Minister act to halt the roll-out of this failed policy, or will she simply leave the injustice burning?

The Prime Minister: What lay behind universal credit was the need to change our benefits system. Under the legacy system that we inherited from the Labour party, more than 1 million people were left on benefits for nearly a decade. What universal credit does is help people into work, and ensure that when they are in work they are able to earn more. As a result of universal credit, 200,000 more people are in work, 1 million disabled people are receiving more money, and 700,000 people are receiving the benefits to which they are entitled. This is a policy that is working.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): We are approaching one of your favourite times of the year, Mr Speaker. Wimbledon starts next week, and many Members have already been enjoying hitting a few balls on the court in New Palace Yard. Will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to wish all the British players the best of luck in the championships, and will she also welcome the Lawn Tennis Association's announcement that £250 million will be provided for 96 new indoor tennis centres that will open up the sport to 3 million more people across the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue in such a timely fashion. I certainly wish the very best to all the British players who will be participating in Wimbledon, and I congratulate Andy Murray on his win in the doubles at the Queen's Club over the weekend. I understand that there is a tennis exhibition here in Parliament today, and that pupils from Paddock School in Putney will be taking part. It is very good to see young people having that experience and that opportunity. I welcome the fact that the LTA is directing funding across the country to where it is needed most to grow the sport from the grassroots up.

Q4. [911577] Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): A recent YouGov poll on Islamophobia in the Conservative party revealed an astounding level of racism. Nearly 50% of those polled would not want a Muslim Prime Minister, while only 8% would be proud if there was one; 67% believe racist myths about Muslim communities, yet eight out of 10 do not think that it is a problem. In the light of that, and as one of the final acts of her premiership, will the Prime Minister finally agree to commission an external inquiry into Islamophobia within her increasingly “nasty party”?

The Prime Minister: We take any allegations of Islamophobia very seriously in the Conservative party. Every allegation is properly investigated. We have seen my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), the chairman of the Conservative party, take swift action. We have seen people suspended from the party; we have seen people excluded from the party. I would just say to the hon. Gentleman that that is in direct contrast to the way in which the Labour party deals with antisemitism. Indeed it is easier to be kicked out of the Labour party for voting Liberal Democrat than for being antisemitic.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): There is a risk that complex conflicts thousands of miles away sometimes appear deceptively simple at Westminster. Does my right hon. Friend share my surprise that the Leader of the Opposition did not mention that Human Rights Watch said last week that Houthi drones targeting civilian targets in Saudi Arabia was a potential war crime? The World Food Programme has recently suspended aid in Houthi-controlled areas because of aid workers not being allowed into Houthi areas and aid being diverted to enrich Houthi forces. Is it not best to recognise the horrors of war on all sides and concentrate not on being one-sided but on getting fully behind the tireless efforts of Martin Griffiths to seek peace in Yemen and support those efforts and bring this conflict to an end?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right Friend; with his experience in the Foreign Office he has seen and knows the complexities of these issues. He is absolutely right: it is important that we look at what is happening in Yemen and recognise the actions that the Houthis have been taking as well. That is why it is so important to bring both sides around the table to ensure we can get that agreed peace settlement and support Martin Griffiths, the UN Special Envoy, in his efforts to bring the parties around the table.

My right hon. Friend references humanitarian aid. I mentioned earlier the extent of the humanitarian aid we have given. One of the great problems we have had to

address is the fact that it is not always possible to get aid to the people who need it most, not because of our inability but because of the insurgents—the way in which the Houthis are preventing that aid from getting to the people who need it most.

Q7. [911581] Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Brexit uncertainty is hitting manufacturing businesses in my constituency. Local managing directors have told me that no deal would be absolutely catastrophic for them and for their exports to Europe, and that it will put local jobs at risk. One firm has already put workers on short-time working temporarily. Does the Prime Minister accept that her Government—and I include in this statement either of her likely successors—have made a catastrophic no-deal Brexit a more likely outcome?

The Prime Minister: I wanted to deliver Brexit with a deal. I brought a deal to this House and the hon. Lady and her colleagues voted three times against that deal.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): On Monday 160 years of food production on the same site in Burton ended with the announcement of the closure of the Kerry Foods plant in my constituency, affecting 900 jobs in Burton and the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler). The Prime Minister will obviously have great sympathy for all those workers who are concerned about their future—concerned about paying their mortgages and for the holidays they have booked and their families. Will she commit to a cross-departmental taskforce to try to ensure we not only get those 900 people back into work but find a new use for that plant in Burton?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend says, I am sure this is going to be a very worrying time for the employees of Kerry Foods and their families. I understand that Ministers from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy are speaking to my hon. Friend to discuss the situation and that they will work with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to explore the various options. We will also want to work closely with businesses and local partners to ensure those affected are well supported and indeed to explore options for the future of the site. Our thoughts are with those who will obviously be very concerned at this time.

Q8. [911582] Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Seven-year-old Talia Belaid, who is the daughter of my constituent, Gosia Szymanowicz, was abducted by her father and taken to Libya in 2012. The father returned here without Talia, and she remains in Libya with his mother. He was jailed but released on licence in 2017, and he has now absconded and is not reporting to the Home Office. All Gosia's legal avenues have been exhausted and she is really desperate. Will the Prime Minister please use every channel available during her final weeks in office to secure Talia's return to her mother in the UK?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady has outlined this case here in the House and I will ensure that the matter is looked into properly by the Department concerned.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): On the Yemen-Saudi catastrophe that is taking place, is it not the case that Britain should move to a position of far greater neutrality and support a comprehensive ceasefire? While Britain is absolutely right to condemn the Houthi attacks on Riyadh and Jeddah, should we not also condemn the night-after-night bombings by Saudi aircraft, which are killing innocent civilians and radicalising tens of thousands of young Yemenis?

The Prime Minister: We have called for a ceasefire and we have supported the efforts that have been made for a ceasefire. We supported those efforts around Hodeidah, which is a very important port for getting in humanitarian relief. This is why it is so important that we continue to work with our international partners and with the UN special envoy to bring about that ceasefire and to enable the parties to come round the table to get a political settlement, which is the only way to ensure the future security and stability of Yemen.

Q9. [911583] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): On Friday, a 14-year-old girl with autism and a learning disability was placed in a secure mental health unit 150 miles from home. Her mother has already had to stop work and her parents are trying to scrape together the money to find temporary accommodation there, so that they can be near their child. Does the Prime Minister not agree that we really need decent, trusted facilities for distressed children in every community, so that families do not have to go through this?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes an important point. The emphasis in the national health service that we are putting on dealing with mental health and on improving the support that is available is a part of this issue. I held a roundtable to look at the outcomes of our review of the Mental Health Act 1983, at which the types of circumstances in which people are provided for were raised. The NHS is looking at this matter very carefully, and we are ensuring that funding is available for further facilities to be provided.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): This afternoon, I will meet my Cheadle constituents who have travelled down to Westminster as part of the Christian Aid climate change lobby. With her world-leading commitment to a net zero target by 2050, the Prime Minister has shown that we are already leading the way. As we leave the EU, will she urge her successor to put the environment at the heart of the Brexit negotiations?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue, and congratulate her Cheadle constituents who are coming down to Westminster today to discuss it. As she says, the Government have made a major step by legislating for net zero, and I hope that the Labour efforts to stop it in the House of Lords will not be successful, so that we can ensure that the legislation is signed. We will make every effort as we leave the European Union, working with our European partners and others, to ensure that we put this issue at the forefront of discussions and that the right approach is taken to it by countries around the world.

Q10. [911584] **Stephen Pound** (Ealing North) (Lab): I appreciate that the Prime Minister is slightly distracted by the intoxicating emotion of imminent freedom and release, but while she is still running the country, could she spare a thought for the 1.3 million PHOMOs in our nation? PHOMOs are, of course, pensioner households missing out. She will be aware that the excellent charity, Independent Age, is supporting the campaign on the £3.5 billion of unclaimed pensioner benefits. That is the Department for Work and Pensions' own figure. Does the Prime Minister agree that that £3.5 billion should not be left to fructify in the coffers of the Treasury, and that it should flow to the PHOMOs?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, which was put with his normal and natural theatricality in the Chamber. As he will have seen, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has heard his question. Obviously we want to ensure that people who are entitled to benefits actually receive them, but this Government can be proud of our record on what we have done for pensioners. Through the triple lock and in various other ways, pensioners are £1,600 a year better off under this Government.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Today's mass lobby is about sustainability, but there can be no economic health or communal wellbeing as long as soulless supermarkets make places ubiquitous while exploiting my Lincolnshire farmers and growers, and while heartless internet giants crush their small competitors. Will the Prime Minister use the tax system to redistribute power away from those heartless, soulless corporate monoliths to all that is small, eclectic, local and particular—for, as you know, Mr Speaker, Schumacher said, "Small is beautiful"?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an important point about the importance of small businesses and of local, independent shops on our high streets. We want to see those businesses supported. That is why we have taken steps already, for example in relation to business rates. It is also why, for those who are concerned about the internet and the way it is being used to undermine some of those small businesses in the retail environment, we are of course taking action in relation to those digital companies.

Q11. [911585] **Emma Dent Coad** (Kensington) (Lab): While the Conservative party leadership candidates tour the country offering unicorns, the Prime Minister may be thinking about her legacy. Will she please listen and act on the entirely reasonable demands of all those affected by Grenfell-related issues, and finally commit to fund the retrofitting of sprinklers in all residential buildings and others where vulnerable people live or work; give clarity on the installation and upkeep of external building insulation; adequately fund our fire and rescue services; and set up a social housing regulator with teeth? The public may thank her for it.

The Prime Minister: Obviously, we are looking across the board. A number of issues have been raised as a result of the terrible tragedy that occurred at Grenfell Tower that we have already acted on, and we are continuing to work, as I indicated in response to the Leader of the

Opposition last week, and to look at issues such as social housing. While many people focus on the issue of cladding and building standards, it is the fact that people's voices were not being heard from that social housing that is of particular concern. Ensuring that we have the right approach in relation to regulation is important. On sprinklers, the recommendation after Lakanal was not that every property over a certain height should have sprinklers retrofitted. It is important to be clear about that.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): On 15 May, my right hon. Friend welcomed a decision by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence to allow the drug Spinraza, which is for spinal muscular atrophy, to be prescribed, including, we thought, to my constituent, the grandson of Mrs Ogborne. NICE has now written to Mrs Ogborne to say that it accepts that the news story that appeared on the NICE website was not clear enough. That is code for saying that my constituent's grandson will not receive this drug. When NICE says something, can it be ensured that it does it, and that bureaucratic flannel does not raise people's hope then to dash it?

The Prime Minister: I am very concerned to hear the case that my hon. Friend has brought before the House of his constituent and Spinraza. I will ensure that it is looked into. If NICE says that Spinraza is available, then obviously it should stand by its word.

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Gentleman does not get a result, and he wants it to be debated again before the summer recess, let me tell him: it will be debated. He can be quite certain of that.

Q12. [911586] **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): In a recently aired BBC Scotland documentary on medical cannabis, the chair of the British Paediatric Neurology Association, Finbar O'Callaghan, said that the NHS will not pay for life-changing medical cannabis for epileptic children, by saying, "Even if you prescribe the product, the NHS isn't going to pay for it." Is his statement correct, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: I have answered questions on this matter in the past, including, I think, from the hon. Lady. The Government have changed the law. Specialist doctors on the General Medical Council specialist register can now prescribe cannabis-based products for medicinal use where there is clinical evidence of benefit. NHS England and the chief medical officer have made it clear that cannabis-based products can be prescribed for medicinal use in appropriate cases, but obviously we need to trust doctors to make clinical decisions in the best interests of patients.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): In Thursday's Adjournment debate I described the barbaric treatment that my father-in-law received at a clinic in Barbados, which ultimately led to his death. It shows the influence of this Chamber that I have now been contacted by many people from around the country who want to talk to me about similar issues. This morning, I was contacted by a resident of Barbados who told me that the practices that go on in Dr Alfred Sparman's clinic are far more horrific than we recognised.

Will either my right hon. Friend or the relevant Department meet me so that I may inquire how we can work with the Barbadian authorities to shut this man down and ensure that what happened to my father-in-law cannot happen to any other citizen?

The Prime Minister: I remember the conversation with my hon. Friend after this terrible tragedy involving his father-in-law. I will certainly ensure that Ministers from the proper Department sit down with him to explore this issue.

Q13. [911587] **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Figures released today show that £973 million of arrears are currently owed under the Child Maintenance Service. Although the new enforcement powers are welcome, CMS's bark continues to be worse than its bite. The UK Government must clamp down on the non-payment of child maintenance, and they must do it now. Will the Prime Minister agree to launch a full root-and-branch review of CMS to ensure that we have a new strategy, in which maintenance payments are properly enforced, to lift these children who, in many cases, are in poverty due to a lack of maintenance payments?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right that we want to ensure maintenance payments are made for those children. Normally the payments are made by fathers but, in some cases, they can be made by mothers, and we need to make sure they recognise their responsibilities and take them seriously. This is a difficult area. For many years, efforts have been made by different Governments to ensure that we get this right and that maintenance payments are made.

I am sure every Member has had constituency cases in relation to this issue. The simplified system introduced in recent years has been working better than the previous system, but I will ensure the relevant Department looks at this issue.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): In my Harlow constituency, many horses and ponies are tied up and tethered by the roadside, maltreated and put in dangerous locations, often without access to food and water. Will the Prime Minister work to end the suffering of these beautiful animals and to amend the outdated Animal Welfare Act 2006 and the code of practice on the welfare of horses to clarify the Government's powers and the duties of local authorities to intervene? And will she urge the RSPCA to treat this as a major concern?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend raises an important issue, and I will certainly ensure that the Department looks at the definitions in the legislation. I would hope that the RSPCA took this as seriously as it takes the ill treatment of other animals.

Q14. [911588] **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): Last week, a brain tumour ended the life of Sarah Wands from Markinch in my constituency. Sarah was 44 years old and a brilliantly gifted young mathematician and statistician, tiny in physical stature but a towering giant as measured by any qualities that matter. Does the Prime Minister share my hope that funding for brain tumour research will be increased to bring forward the day when other families are not affected as the Wands family have been?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises a very, very sad case. A life full of great promise has been sadly cut short, and our thoughts and prayers are with the family of the individual concerned.

We have been putting more money into research on brain tumours, which is an important area and one in which my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), the former Health Secretary, started extra work within the NHS. That work continues.

The hon. Gentleman raises a very important issue and, as I say, our thoughts and prayers are with all those affected by this case.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): One in two people in the UK now develops cancer at some point in their lifetime, and around 60% of them will require radiotherapy as part of their treatment. We do not have a single linear accelerator in West Sussex, meaning that my constituents travel long distances every day for treatment. That is not only costly but, of course, gruelling for people who are feeling so unwell. Will the Prime Minister outline what steps the Government are taking to ensure that my constituents have the same access to medical care as others in adjacent counties?

The Prime Minister: I fully recognise the concern that my hon. Friend has raised. Looking at how we treat cancer is one of the issues in the NHS long-term plan

on which the NHS is focusing. I recognise the concern for those who have to travel long distances to receive such treatment. As she said, it is not just expensive, but can be difficult and gruelling in their state of health. It will be looked at as part of future programmes for the NHS.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Prime Minister and the whole House will be aware of the long-standing campaign for justice and compensation by victims of the Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism in Northern Ireland and throughout the UK. US citizens have been compensated by the Libyan authorities but UK citizens have not. Some £12 billion in frozen assets is held in the United Kingdom and £17 million in tax has been recovered on that money in the last three years. Will she undertake to use that money to help the victims, and will she ensure that the special representative who has been appointed works closely with the victims to obtain the justice that they rightly deserve?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of the justice that those victims deserve. I have raised the issue myself with the Libyan Government in the past, and I will certainly ensure that the special representative is able to make every effort to ensure that the victims get that to which they are entitled and that he works with them in doing that: it is important that their voices are a crucial part of that.

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before I take points of order, I have a small number of announcements to make, the first of which draws upon and indirectly relates to something that the Prime Minister said about her good wishes to the England female football team. I think that the House will want to know of the activities of the women's parliamentary football team, which are regularly communicated to me, not least because I am the president of said team. I hope that the whole House will join me in wishing the women's parliamentary football team well at the weekend in its Guinness world record attempt for the number of female footballers playing a game, an initiative being undertaken in collaboration with Equal Playing Field, whose mission is to challenge inequality in sport, particularly for girls and women globally.

Secondly, I remind the House that today marks the 40th anniversary of the House's decision to endorse the proposal from Norman St John-Stevan, an extremely distinguished Leader of the House, to establish the system of departmental Select Committees. Since that momentous decision on 26 June 1979, those Committees have grown and developed into a key—I might almost be tempted to say “the key”—means by which the House holds Ministers to account in detail for their conduct of government. I hope that colleagues will agree that it was a decision that we should all celebrate.

Finally, as I know concern about human rights is widespread in the House, I hope that colleagues will welcome to our proceedings the Sikyong of the Central Tibetan Administration, Lobsang Sangay. He has been here before and he is here again. In a very important way, he represents the people of Tibet. We identify with you, sir; it is a pleasure to see you again, as colleagues will agree; and I look forward to seeing you later today. Please continue your good and important work, even in the face of considerable pressures.

Points of Order

12:54 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Diolch yn fawr iawn. On Monday, I received a letter from the Chief Whip confirming an intention to move the writ for the Brecon and Radnorshire by-election on Tuesday 25 June. Yesterday came and went, but no writ was moved. It was claimed that an issue with Powys Council, specifically the returning officer, was delaying the process. Powys Council confirmed within a matter of hours that that was not the case, and that it was waiting for the writ to be moved. ITV Wales's political editor, Adrian Masters, has speculated that the Government have not moved the writ for the Brecon and Radnorshire by-election not because of problems in Powys but because they could not guarantee that Powys would not—as would be its right—hold the election on 25 July, that being of course the first full day of the new Prime Minister's premiership.

Can you confirm that you have had notification that the Government intend to move the writ today, or will they continue to miss their own deadline and make highly questionable excuses for sparing the blushes of a new Prime Minister by delaying moving the writ?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her point of order and for giving me notice of it. I was advised yesterday that the plan to move the writ yesterday had been aborted. Instead, I was advised at that stage, approximately 24 hours ago, that the plan was to move the writ today. However, I was informed earlier that the writ would not be moved today. If the right hon. Lady is asking me, as the Chair, whether I am clear about when the writ will be moved, the honest answer is that I am not aware. It is certainly regrettable for her to have received information privately that it transpired was not borne out by events. If she was given to understand that it would be moved but it was not—and indeed has not been—that is regrettable. I suggest that her best recourse is directly to approach the Government Chief Whip on the matter.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Many of us have visited Richard Ratcliffe, who is now in his 12th day of hunger strike in support of his wife, Nazanin, wrongly jailed in Tehran. The number of messages, flowers and visitors shows that the House and the country are strongly in sympathy with the Ratcliffe family's long ordeal. Is there anything that you can do to spread the word that other Members visiting him would be extremely welcome?

Mr Speaker: I agree with the hon. Gentleman: it would be very welcome if Members had time and felt inclined to visit Richard Ratcliffe. I am not in the business of announcing my travel plans, and the hon. Gentleman would not expect me to do so, but I have heard what he has said and I have my own thoughts on the matter. I have indicated that I think it a very good idea, and it would be very welcome if Members from across the House, simply as human beings to another human being, felt inclined to demonstrate solidarity and support. I agree unreservedly with the hon. Gentleman and I rather imagine I will be having another conversation with him at a later date to tell him more.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you know, people travel far and wide to come to Prime Minister's questions. Today the imam from the university mosque, Sheikh Mohsen, and his colleague, Mahaboob Basha, are here. Given that people have to travel so far and that the public and private travel networks are not that great, might you consider in the future the possibility of delaying the start time of PMQs to enable more people to travel from further afield to view the proceedings?

Mr Speaker: That is an ingenious idea. I am not sure that if it were a divisible proposition before the House it would necessarily command a majority. I say that because I noticed some furrowed brows at the suggestion that we should start late. We often start late anyway because I am keen to ensure that Backbenchers have a full opportunity in the previous session. The hon. Gentleman is a discerning and observant fellow, and I feel sure that he will have noticed that I also often allow a full opportunity for Back Benchers in Prime Minister's questions. Even if someone is a bit late for Prime Minister's questions, there is a good chance that they will still witness a goodly proportion of them. I will reflect on the hon. Gentleman's idea, but he should not ring me and I cannot guarantee to ring him.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am always troubled when I hear any allegation of bad faith in the Chamber, and today we heard an allegation that a Member has made a career out of lying. Would you please guide me on whether it is in order for Members to accuse others of lying?

Mr Speaker: I did not hear any allegation of dishonesty. I did not hear that. If there was an allegation of dishonesty, I did not hear it. I heard used another that I do not think was particularly tasteful but that I did not judge to be disorderly. What I would say to the hon. Gentleman—apart from that obviously I can rule only on that which I hear there and then, and there was a great deal of noise in the Chamber—is this: if there is to be an allegation of dishonesty against a Member, that allegation should be made on a substantive motion. That is the long-established procedure in the House and it should not otherwise be done.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I have given an answer. If the hon. Gentleman's point of order is on the same matter—

James Heappey *indicated dissent.*

Mr Speaker: It is on a totally unrelated matter.

James Heappey *indicated assent.*

Mr Speaker: Very well, I am happy to hear it, but that is the answer to the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts). Such allegations should be made on substantive motions and not otherwise. That is the answer. As far as each individual situation is concerned, the Chair obviously has to deal with the circumstances as he or, in the case of one or other of my deputies, she finds those circumstances.

James Heappey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Monday, we passed legislation to set net zero by 2050 as our decarbonisation target. It is a hugely important thing to have done and our constituents are very interested in the matter. Mr Speaker, you have done great things to make the proceedings of the House more intelligible to the public beyond, and websites such as TheyWorkForYou have done likewise, yet because there was no Division on Monday, the unanimous support for that legislation will go unrecorded by TheyWorkForYou. At a time when the public think that our politics is hopelessly divided, do you agree that at moments when the House is unanimous in its support for such legislation, TheyWorkForYou should record that, not just the occasions on which we disagree?

Mr Speaker: We here are not responsible—the Chair is certainly not responsible—for the *modus operandi* of TheyWorkForYou. If memory serves, there will have been wording at the end of the debate saying that the question was agreed to, which is itself revealing. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is a pity, to put it no more strongly, if a situation of consensus in the House is not regarded as noteworthy. I think that is noteworthy. I do not have an immediate solution, but knowing the perspicacity—indeed, the indefatigability—of the hon. Gentleman, I feel sure that he will now beetle back to his office and pen a note or, better still, send an email to TheyWorkForYou, drawing attention to his efforts in the Chamber and imploring them to up their game.

BILL PRESENTED

ANIMAL WELFARE (SENTENCING) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Michael Gove, supported by the Prime Minister and David Rutley, presented a Bill to make provision about the mode of trial and maximum penalty for certain offences under the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 410) with explanatory notes (Bill 410-EN).

Football Regulation

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

1.3 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish an independent regulator of football clubs; and for connected purposes.

On 9 March this year, supporters of Blackpool football club went to watch a home match for the first time after a four-year boycott of home fixtures. The reason for their protest was the mismanagement, as they saw it, of the club by its owners, Owen and Karl Oyston. It was more than simply mismanagement, though: the fans believed that the Oystons had been bleeding the club dry, not just failing to invest but taking large sums of money out. Indeed, a High Court judgment found that the Oystons had “illegitimately stripped” £26.77 million from the club.

Previously, as Nick Harris reported in the *Daily Mail*, Mr Oyston senior was the highest paid person in English football in the 2010-11 season, when Blackpool were in the premier league, receiving an eye-watering £11 million, with only Wayne Rooney reportedly coming close to similar remuneration, yet there was nothing the supporters could do within the existing structures of the game to force a change of ownership and stop their club being ransacked. Unable to prevent the mismanagement by the Oystons, the supporters had to take things into their own hands, and eventually launched a boycott of home games to deny Blackpool's owners their money. The supporters received support from fans of other clubs and from the national supporters' organisations, but little support from the football authorities. To get to the point at which the club is now being sold, it has taken four years of their not doing the one thing that binds them together and defines them: watching the football team they love.

If this was a one-off, I would feel sorry for Blackpool fans, pleased that they have almost won their campaign, and move on, but it is not a one-off. Coventry City fans are in an even worse situation. Who can forget the 1987 cup final, with players such as Micky Gynn, Brian Kilcline, Keith Houchen and Steve Ogrizovic, and manager John Sillett dancing on the Wembley turf with the FA cup? This once proud club is being driven into the ground by its owners, Sisu, which is an investment firm based offshore—its ultimate owners are not clear. Coventry City have had to find a ground-sharing option some 18 miles from Coventry, at Birmingham City, as the legal wrangle continues between Sisu, Wasps rugby union football club and Coventry City Council. Sisu is answerable to no one; indeed, according to the *Coventry Telegraph*, it made no public statement between 2016 and March this year.

Further up the M6, Bolton Wanderers, another of the great names in English football, is now in administration, and is so badly managed that staff have not been paid and other clubs are assisting with payroll and even providing food banks to support employees. I recall going to the old Burnden Park in 1994 to watch Everton play against Bolton in the FA cup, and meeting the

great Nat Lofthouse. How can the club of the Lion of Vienna now be resorting to food banks as it is run into the ground?

This is not a recent phenomenon. In 1997, the owner of Brighton & Hove Albion closed the old Goldstone Ground, without making any alternative provision, so that he could sell off the site and make millions from property development. My own hometown club, formerly Chester City football club, was driven into the ground by a succession of owners who used it either as a tax-dodging scheme or in one case—it has been alleged—as a front for laundering ill-gotten gains from criminal activity. The club dissolved and was reborn as a fan-owned club, which has been challenging at times, but those challenges have never included deliberately running the club down and syphoning off cash.

The concern for supporters is that they are only ever one bad owner away from these types of problems, and that they have nowhere to turn for help. The FA and the leagues have an owners and directors test, but this might be relevant only in the case of, for example, previous criminal convictions. A group like Sisu can turn up at Coventry and bleed the club dry, with no intention of investing in its future, and the FA can do nothing.

I have given just a few examples of clubs with question marks over the way they are being or have been run. We can currently add to that list Notts County, Gateshead and Bury—last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith) petitioned the High Court on behalf of supporters in his constituency—and in the recent past Portsmouth, Hartlepool, Charlton Athletic and more. There are too many to be isolated cases, which suggests there is a broader problem that needs to be addressed.

When I served on the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, I raised this issue with Greg Clarke, the chairman of the FA and a decent man who I believe genuinely wants to do his best for football. I asked him whether there was nothing the FA could do about unscrupulous owners; Mr Clarke replied that it can look into the backgrounds of potential owners—he was referring to the owners and directors test—but cannot do anything about a person who is simply bad at running a football club. The FA has devolved such matters to the leagues, but the leagues are membership organisations, and any rules or regulations have to be voted in by their own members—those very same club owners. The worst sanction is a points deduction for going into administration, but that is hardly relevant in the cases I have described.

Football needs independent regulation—that is, regulation independent of the owners, who have a vested interest. The making of rules or regulations about football clubs, and decisions on their application, should not be the task of the professional football clubs or the people who own and manage them. That regulation could and should be done by the Football Association, in the interests of the game as a whole. A regulatory body under the auspices of the FA, adequately funded and suitably staffed, with effective regulations and the power to enforce them, could restore faith in the running of the game.

Of course, there are ways in which the owners and directors test can be improved, but it will never be foolproof. Not all bad owners start out bad. A regulator

should be there to educate, advise and support. Punishment and sanctions should be the last resort. The good owners should have nothing to fear; they should benefit from reflective improvements throughout the game. This Bill would bring into being an independent regulator with the powers to undertake independent and forensic audits of clubs' directors and financial activities, where sufficient concern has been expressed about the management of the club, to report to the FA with recommendations for action, to address any deliberate financial mismanagement, or, of course, to decide that there is no case for further action.

There would be limits. I remember, for example, going to The Valley in November 1998 to watch Everton play Charlton. As I arrived there, I was horrified to learn that the then Everton chairman, Peter Johnson, had just sold our totemic striker Duncan Ferguson to Newcastle, behind the back of the manager. I wanted Johnson out, but a bad decision such as that would not necessarily require independent scrutiny. I am concerned about consistent behaviour to run a club into the ground. Similarly, I recall one previous owner of Chester City, an American, who sacked the manager and started to pick the team himself. That is bad management, as referred to by Greg Clarke, but it is not destructive management, using the club for nefarious means, and is unlikely on its own to fall under the scope of the regulator described in the Bill.

Ideally, it would be the Football Association that would undertake these activities, but in the absence of action an independent regulator is needed so that the scandals of Brighton, Blackpool, Coventry and Chester City are a thing of the past and supporters have somewhere to turn to in their desperation. Perhaps now the Football Association will take the opportunity to consider bringing forward proposals of its own to address this problem. I urge it to consider the suggestions of the Football Supporters Association, which I have consulted closely in preparing the Bill.

Although the directors of a football club may be the legal owners, they are surely only the custodians on behalf of the whole family of supporters of each club. If they are unable to act in the best interests of the club

and the team, and are seen to be acting in their own interests to the detriment of the club, that cannot be allowed.

If I do not like Tesco, I can go to Sainsbury's. If I am still unhappy, I can go to Asda, Waitrose, Aldi or Lidl, but we cannot do that with a football team. Football supporters have a profound sense of loyalty, identity and belonging to a club, which cannot be transferred at the first sign of trouble. In my case, I am the fourth generation of my family to support Everton, I was born into that tradition—you cannot manufacture it. Most supporters would say exactly the same of their club.

Football is a great unifier, bringing the nation together—this applies equally to each of our four home nations—in great moments of unity, as well as being something that we can talk about to complete strangers and bond over in the pub or by the coffee machine. That is why, when we have so many other critical issues to consider in this House, this Bill is important. Football matters to so many people. At a time when our country is so divided, football, in common with all sports but perhaps more than any other sport, can bring our country together again. When fans such as those of Blackpool, Coventry or Bolton Wanderers are treated as abysmally as they have been, while their owners bleed the clubs dry, there has to be a mechanism for giving them an outlet to redress their grievances, because at the moment they have nowhere to go. I would prefer the Football Association to do this, and hope that it will do so, but if it cannot we must support the supporters with a tough and independent regulator. The Bill does that. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Christian Matheson, Damian Collins, Mr Marcus Jones, Mr Jim Cunningham, Colleen Fletcher, Gordon Marsden, Jo Stevens, Alison McGovern, Justin Madders, Ian Mearns, Chi Onwurah and Chris Heaton-Harris present the Bill.

Christian Matheson accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 411).

Opposition Day

[UNALLOTTED HALF DAY]

Immigration

1.14 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House regrets that the outgoing Prime Minister's legacy will be her hostile environment policy and her unrealistic and damaging net migration target; calls for a fundamental change in the Government's approach to immigration, refugee and asylum policy to one based on evidence, respect for human rights and fairness; welcomes the contribution made by migrants to the UK's economy, society and culture; rejects regressive Government proposals to extinguish European free movement rights and to require EU nationals in the UK to apply for settled and pre-settled status; and recognises that a migration policy that works for the whole of the UK will require different policy solutions for different parts of the UK, particularly given Scotland's demographic and economic profile.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to introduce this debate on what is such a crucial subject—the urgent need for Parliament to draw a line under a dismal decade of dreadful and sometimes disgraceful migration and asylum policies. It is sad, but the plain truth is that the Prime Minister takes a massive share of responsibility for those policies, which were driven by her awful net migration target and her ramping up of the horrendous hostile environment policies—the twin pillars of her drastic reign at the Home Office. Rather than tackling burning injustices right across the field of immigration and asylum policy, her policies created them. Yet Parliament must also take its share of the blame, because too often MPs not only failed to oppose her but actively cheered her on, and, collectively, we should put that right today.

Pretty much everybody in this Chamber knows that the net migration target is a load of utter baloney. It was a number plucked from thin air. It was utterly unachievable and undesirable from the outset. It created a numbers-obsessed Home Office pursuing ever more restrictive policies, regardless of the damage to families, our higher education system and our economy. Tens of thousands of couples were split apart and children divided from their parents. Universities were put at a competitive disadvantage not just by more restrictive immigration rules, particularly regarding post-study work, but by the message that was sent right around the globe. Small and medium-sized businesses were effectively excluded from recruiting from beyond the EU. The net migration target and its relentless failure problematised and politicised immigration numbers and has substantially contributed to the political mess that this country is in today.

Last week, the Home Secretary described the net migration target as “crude” and said that it should be ditched, and he is 100% right. Nobody with a brain cell could demur from that view, yet for years this Parliament failed to stand up to that nonsense. Every quarter, a new set of immigration statistics would be published showing the target missed by a country mile—yet again. The Official Opposition would table an urgent question, not to attack the stupid target but to criticise the Conservatives and Liberal Democrat coalition for failing to meet it. In response, the coalition would pledge to get tougher still. What a dreadful climate—a three-party

bidding war on who would be better at clamping down on migration to reach an arbitrary number. We must never return to those days.

It is good that the Home Secretary wants to ditch the net migration target, but it makes sense to ditch the hostile environment along with it, as the two are inextricably linked as a package. If one does not make sense, neither does the other. Alongside endlessly restricted visa rules, the hostile environment was a truly wicked means by which a net migration target would be achieved. However, as the independent chief inspector has pointed out, the Home Office never lifted a finger to monitor the impact that the hostile environment was having.

I want to focus on one key component of the hostile environment: the right to rent scheme. These measures have

“a disproportionately discriminatory effect, and I would assume and hope that those legislators who voted in favour of the scheme would be aghast to learn of its discriminatory effect”.

Those are not my words, but the words of Mr Justice Martin Spencer in the High Court, who in ruling the whole scheme unlawful went on to say:

“Even if the Scheme had been shown to be efficacious in playing its part in the control of immigration, I would have found that this was significantly outweighed by the discriminatory effect... In these circumstances, I find that the Government has not justified this measure, nor, indeed, come close to doing so.”

That is a hostile environment in a nutshell: no evidence that it achieves anything positive, hugely discriminatory, totally unjustified and illegal. I trust that legislators who voted in favour of it are aghast. We should tell the Home Office today to accept that ruling instead of appealing it on the shameful grounds that the discrimination can, in some way, be justified.

It is fair to say that we were all aghast when we saw the hostile environment at its most vicious—the utter scandal of Windrush. Yet here we are still waiting for the lessons-learned review and waiting for it to be published in the very near future. As I have said before, it would be charitable to the Home Office and to the Prime Minister to say that they were reckless about the effect that the hostile environment would have. At worst, they took a conscious policy decision in the knowledge that there would be collateral damage, but deemed it acceptable. Warnings from the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants and many others went unheeded. Concerns expressed by high commissioners from the Caribbean were ignored. The impact assessment for the Immigration Act 2016 did everything but use the term “Windrush children” when explaining its likely negative impact. The Government ignored every single one of these warnings. The outgoing Prime Minister simply pressed on with ramping up the climate of checks at every turn, fully aware that it would be often close to impossible for many Windrush children, and others, to prove their legal position. Jobs and homes were lost; people were detained and removed. Statues and annual Windrush celebrations will not wash. A more fitting response would be to end the hostile environment that caused so much harm and hurt to the Windrush generation in the first place.

Contrary to what we have heard from too many on the Government Benches, this was not just one sad and isolated administrative error that could be quickly rectified. The disastrous impact of the hostile environment—essentially a half-baked, back-door ID card—does not

start or end there. Its victims are a huge and varied group: the 9 million British citizens without a passport who struggle because 43% of landlords and landladies say they are less likely to rent to such citizens now that the hostile environment has made them petrified of getting right-to-rent checks wrong; the thousands of children who are unable to afford the citizenship they are entitled to or the leave to remain that they qualify for; the children who do have leave to remain but who are brought up in families with no recourse to public funds; the hundreds—perhaps thousands—of Eritreans who were wrongly refused asylum on the basis of the Home Office's dodgy country guidance, many of whom are now street-homeless and destitute; and the several thousands of students wrongly caught up in the Test of English for International Communication teaching scandal who were wrongly presumed guilty after the company that messed up the testing in the first place was then allowed to clean up its own mess.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will remember that a little while ago I raised the issue of constituents of mine who do not possess Android telephones, and therefore have to make a 500-mile round trip to the document scanning centre in Edinburgh. The Government say that it will be possible to complete the process on an iPhone within the year, but the point is that broadband coverage in parts of my constituency is patchy to say the very least. Does that not mean that people who, with the best will in the world, would like to remain are being hampered in their efforts, which will in turn hit businesses in remote parts of my constituency that depend on EU nationals?

Stuart C. McDonald: I agree wholeheartedly. I will come shortly to the issue of the 3 million EU citizens in the UK and how we risk repeating some of the mistakes that were made when the Windrush scandal broke. I just want to finish the list of those who have already been affected by the hostile environment, which includes the people who the Home Office agrees have been victims of trafficking, but who it does not think even merit a short period of leave to remain. The list of people impacted by the hostile environment goes on and on.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The hon. Gentleman said he would come back to the point made by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone). Will he also use this opportunity to clarify for anyone watching this debate that cases of constituents needing to travel 500 miles will happen only during the initial trial phase, and that when the full scheme is rolled out people will be able to complete the process through the post office or—[*Interruption.*] SNP Members are shouting, but we have to put both sides of the story so that we do not unnecessarily raise alarms when there are other methods that people can use to apply for the scheme.

Stuart C. McDonald: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair enough point, but the Home Office still has to do more to make the EU settlement scheme as accessible as possible. I will return to these points in due course.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): My hon. Friend does an excellent job on the Home Affairs Committee. Does he agree that the hostile environment is alive and well today in Glasgow, with the Home

Office contractor Serco threatening to make 300 asylum seekers homeless, after they have been labelled as failed asylum seekers? This is a perfect example of the hostile environment and hostile action in the city of Glasgow.

Stuart C. McDonald: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. I look forward to supporting his Adjournment debate on the issue tomorrow. I will shortly come to the asylum system as a whole, as it is one area where we need absolute root-and-branch reform.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On the subject of the hostile environment, does my hon. Friend share my horror at a document that I found yesterday on the Government's website relating to trafficked women from Nigeria, which says that

“trafficked women who return from Europe, wealthy from prostitution, enjoy high social-economic status and in general are not subject to negative social attitudes on return”?

Does he agree that this is abhorrent language, and that the Government should immediately change this documentation and this attitude?

Stuart C. McDonald: My hon. Friend's point speaks for itself. That is truly abhorrent.

The Prime Minister's explicit and almost dystopian goal was to create the hostile environment, as if we can hermetically seal off the wicked illegal immigrants while the rest of us go about our business as usual. It was an approach that reached its absolute nadir with the horrendous “go home” vans—a disastrous episode that encapsulated everything that is wrong with the policy and precisely illustrated the key point here, which is that the hostile climate that the Government seek to create affects every single one of us. The hostile climate should be destroyed with its partner in crime: the net migration target.

I have outlined the sad legacy of the outgoing Prime Minister on migration policy. With her departure and influence totally removed from the Home Office, this is a time for radical reform, including rolling back most of her policies and putting evidence-based policy making, human rights and fairness at front and centre.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): As part of that change in policy, would the hon. Gentleman agree that we have to look at lifting the ban on genuine asylum seekers being able to work and contribute to the economy of the country, rather than forcing them to live on a pittance and not giving them the dignity they deserve?

Stuart C. McDonald: I wholeheartedly agree; I know the hon. Lady has tabled an amendment to the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill on that subject, as we did during the passage of the Immigration Act 2016, so her amendment will have our wholehearted support. I was pleased to be at an event yesterday evening with a coalition of organisations working towards that goal, and I hope the Home Office is listening.

In fairness, there have been little green shoots of recovery under the new Home Secretary and the Immigration Minister. I have welcomed the work to extend the resettlement scheme, for example. There have also been warm words on other possible areas of reform, but they are as yet a million miles away from the fully fledged reform agenda and actions we need.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Many people come to see me in my surgeries about family visit visas. The hostile environment is extending to such a degree that people cannot bring their family members over for a visit, because there is a presumption that they will stay once they are here. The Home Office is so bogged down in its attitude towards anybody who wants to come to the UK that we are not able to make progress. Should there not be wholesale reform of the system?

Stuart C. McDonald: There should indeed be wholesale reform of the visit visas and related decision-making processes. Families find themselves in a particularly horrendous position because the family visa rules have been tightened so much that so many family members cannot come here permanently. But when they come to visit, they are then accused of coming here under false pretences in order to stay deliberately, so they are in a Catch-22 situation. I will return to family visas in a moment. The point I am trying to make is that if we do not learn the lessons from these disastrous mistakes, we are bound to repeat them, and there is a serious risk that the Government are going to do just that with the 3 million EU citizens.

As an increasing number of voices across the House—including the Home Affairs Committee—have said, the EU settled status scheme has a fundamental flaw at its heart. Even with the best will in the world and even with the Home Office pulling out all the stops to try to make the scheme work, hundreds of thousands of EU nationals in this country will not be aware of or understand the need to apply. They will lose their rights overnight and will be thrown even deeper into the hostile environment than the Windrush generation. The Government must therefore enshrine the rights of EU nationals in law, leaving them to use the settled status scheme as a means of providing evidence of status, rather than actually constituting the status itself. The Home Office must listen; otherwise this Parliament will have to make it listen to protect our EU citizens from the same disastrous fate as the Windrush generation.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The situation is even worse for seasonal workers who are not permanently settled here, is it not? The whole hostile environment attitude has driven perhaps the most stupid policy from this Government, who will ask 60,000 seasonal workers—essential labour—from the European economic area to go home and then perhaps invite 2,500 of them back on an expensive pilot scheme to do the work that the 60,000 people did previously. Has not this whole attitude just delivered some of the most sclerotic policy making that any of us can remember?

Stuart C. McDonald: My hon. Friend makes a very valid point. The Government have shown such a tin ear to calls from across the House to implement a new seasonal agricultural workers scheme. Our answer to that problem is, of course, continued free movement plus a seasonal agricultural workers scheme, and we look forward to the Government actually listening to all those calls—not just from political parties here, but from the industry itself.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I want to take the opportunity of the Minister being here to intervene, because the Scottish Affairs Committee

has been looking at the very issue of seasonal workers. We have found that the hostile environment is having an impact on a Government pilot by making it as difficult as possible for visas to be secured. The Government are asking for extra fees—over and above—to get people here to see whether they can work in the Government pilot. Does not that just demonstrate the excesses of the hostile environment—that it even applies to Government pilots?

Stuart C. McDonald: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I commend the work that his Committee has done in this area. It would be useful if the Home Office paid close heed to it.

I have discussed what we need to do to avoid repeating the mistakes of the Windrush generation.

Douglas Ross: The hon. Gentleman is outlining some concerns about the implications of people not applying for settled status. Does he therefore take exception to his SNP colleague, an MEP for Scotland, publicly saying that he will not apply for settled status and in that way encourage others to follow suit, which may see them fall through the gaps?

Stuart C. McDonald: Every individual must make their own call about whether they want to apply. I, for one, would certainly encourage all my constituents and all the EU nationals watching this to sign up for the scheme, but that does not take away from my essential point that they should not be asked to apply to stay in their own home in the first place. These rights should be enshrined in law right now.

It is not just in terms of the 3 million that we need radical change. All across the field of immigration, there is a massive job of work to do to help to fix the lives that have already been messed up by migration policies and to ensure that we avoid messing up so many more—to build a system that actually benefits our economy and society instead of undermining them and sowing division. Everyone in this House will have had many cases, as we have already heard, where we think that the rules are unfair.

This debate provides an opportunity to make the case for reform as we look ahead to the next chapter in immigration law form. I want to mention four areas very briefly, but there are a million more that I could flag up. First, I turn to the issue of families, which has already been raised. In pursuit of the net migration target, this country has adopted almost the most restrictive family rules in the world, with an extraordinary income requirement and ludicrously complicated rules and restrictions on how that requirement can be met. Over 40% of the UK population would not be entitled to live in this country with a non-EU spouse. The figures are even worse for women, for ethnic minorities, and for different parts of the UK. The Children's Commissioner previously wrote a damning report about the 15,000 Skype children—there must now be many, many more—who get to see their mum or dad only via the internet, thanks to these rules, which force too many to pick between their country and their loved ones. It is appalling that the Home Office seems determined to extend these rules to EU spouses so that many more thousands of families will be split apart. We should be ditching these awful rules, not making more families suffer.

Secondly, there is citizenship. I have met with the Minister representatives of the Project for Registration of Children as British Citizens, and I know that last week she met the organisation, Let Us Learn. The Home Secretary has acknowledged in evidence to the Home Affairs Committee that over £1,000 is an incredible amount to charge children simply to process a citizenship application when they are entitled to that citizenship. The administrative cost is about £400, so over £600 is a subsidy for other Home Office activities. There is no excuse for funding the Home Office by overcharging kids for their citizenship. At the very least, the fee must be reduced to no more than the administrative charge. More broadly, we need to reduce the ridiculous fees that are being charged across the immigration system, especially to children.

Christine Jardine: The hon. Gentleman is making a very important point. I want to mention something that recently came to my attention at a surgery. A former EU national who is now a British citizen is concerned about the implications for them, if we leave the European Union, of the way in which the immigration laws have been written. Even though the settled status scheme might seem unclear, the situation is not clear for those who have already taken out citizenship either.

Stuart C. McDonald: The hon. Lady makes an interesting point. I do not know whether she is planning to contribute to the debate; if so, she can speak more about that.

Thirdly, our immigration detention system remains outrageously bloated, and detention without time limit makes the UK an outlier in Europe. We detain too many people for too long, including many vulnerable adults, such as torture survivors, who should never be detained at all. It is a national scandal and an affront to the rule of law, as myriad reports have shown. We have had some small forward steps from the current Home Office team, but also some missteps. We need radical reform so that detention is a matter of absolute last resort and not routine.

Fourthly, there is our asylum system, which could command a whole debate in itself. There can be few areas that require as big an overhaul. We need to ensure better-quality decisions and proper financial support. We must support the wonderful coalition urging the Government to lift the ban on asylum seekers working. We need a better managed move-on period and properly accountable and funded systems of accommodation. We need a caseworking system so that we are never left with dreadful mass evictions like those we look set to see in Glasgow.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent series of points, particularly now that he has come on to the asylum system, which is a subject close to my heart. Does he agree that if we want to show the world that we are truly an outward-facing, internationalist country—as I believe everyone in this House would agree we are; it is part of our values—then the asylum system is in urgent need of reform to make sure that refugees are truly welcome, and to live up to the findings of the Home Office's own recently published report on refugee integration? There is a lot we could do right now. Even in the next three weeks, we could make it possible for asylum seekers to work after six months.

Stuart C. McDonald: There is a host of opportunities to improve the asylum system. Only last week, we debated refugee family reunion rules. We have already passed on Second Reading a Bill to change those rules, yet it has been held up in the system, thanks to the Government.

I have briefly mentioned four issues, but there are a million others that other Members of Parliament will touch on, such as visas for religious workers, visit visas, lack of appeal rights, lack of legal aid, the complexities of the tier 2 system, visas for fishing vessels, visas for agricultural workers—and so on and so forth. The truth is that our immigration and asylum systems are truly in a mess.

That brings me on to the Government's proposals for our future immigration system—their White Paper. Next to none of these issues is addressed in the White Paper at all. The bit of the immigration system that is a disaster is the bit that is being left largely unreformed. In fact, it is being rolled out so as to apply to EU nationals in future. The one bit of the immigration system that works perfectly well—free movement of people—is being annihilated. The Government have their priorities completely the wrong way round. I love free movement and my party is passionate about its benefits. We deeply regret that these amazing rights are in danger of coming to an end. All the evidence is that it is beneficial economically—for growth, for productivity and for public finances. In Scotland, in particular, it has transformed our demographic outlook. From a country of net emigration, we are now a country of positive in-migration. We have benefited hugely culturally and socially.

Of course, the *quid pro quo* is that we will lose our free movement rights too. I have benefited from free movement, as I know many Members in the Chamber have. I regret that this Government want to prevent future generations from enjoying the enormous benefits that so many of us have enjoyed. People did not vote to end free movement, contrary to what the Prime Minister says. This is the Prime Minister's red line, not the people's. Simply repeating *ad nauseam* that we are “taking back control of our borders” is not an argument and it is not leadership. Real leadership is looking at the evidence and saying that free movement is an enormous benefit that we should treasure and keep.

We welcome the gradual change in approach from the Home Secretary towards one-size-fits-all migration policy making. We welcome his announcement that the proposed new £30,000 threshold will be reviewed, including the possibility of regional and sub-state variations within the UK. However, I must emphasise that this is just a small start—baby steps. There are so many other features of the proposed new immigration system that are causing huge concern. Scotland's economy relies disproportionately on small and medium-sized enterprises. The tier 2 system is not designed for SMEs. Its bureaucracy and expense make it inaccessible for many businesses, which therefore instead recruit from the EU if they cannot do so locally. Reducing the threshold does not fix that; it simply means businesses jumping through administrative hoops and expense simply to recruit workers they could previously have recruited under free movement.

Thangam Debbonaire: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the work done by Hope not Hate and British Future establishes that the British people are behind

[Thangam Debbonaire]

what he is arguing for? Most people actually value immigration; they just want a system that is fair, accountable and transparent. That is what I believe all of us here would want.

Stuart C. McDonald: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I think that all sensible people would be behind the arguments I am making.

The other point about reducing the threshold is that it does not fix the fundamental problem that ending free movement risks a demographic time bomb for Scotland, with implications for its workforce, its economy and its public finances. The Scottish Government have proposed ways in which additional Scottish visas can help to play a part in addressing that, learning from systems such as the Canadian system. I want the Home Secretary and the Immigration Minister to engage constructively with those proposals. But ultimately the best answer to the challenges Scotland faces is continued free movement.

We need to recognise that under the outgoing Prime Minister, migration policy has gone horribly wrong. The current Home Secretary accepts that the net migration target was wrong. The High Court says that key planks of the hostile environment were discriminatory and unjustified. Let us ditch both. Let us learn from the past and not repeat these mistakes, particularly regarding the 3 million. If the new system is to work for all of the UK, it will have to include different rules for different parts of it. Let us seize this opportunity to turn over an entirely new leaf on immigration and asylum policy.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call the Minister, on her birthday.

1.39 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I welcome this debate on immigration and the opportunity for what I am sure will be a thoughtful and constructive discussion. I am a little disappointed not to see the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) in her place, because when we were discussing refugee family reunion last week, she made a point about the importance of language. I added to that the importance of tone, and I hope that we will hear people using their language carefully this afternoon. I am sure, given the Members present, that we will.

The immigration system is at a point where we are preparing to leave the European Union and working to provide status to the 3.5 million or so European Union citizens who have made the UK their home. Through the measures we set out in our White Paper on the future borders and immigration system, we are looking forward to the biggest change to the immigration system for over 45 years and are halfway through engaging in a year-long national conversation.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The Minister referred to the EU citizens who have made the UK their home, but what about those of them who were denied the right to vote in the recent European elections? What will the Government do to redress that? Was that not a shabby treatment of those very citizens

in what should have been an all-inclusive democratic process? It is simply not good enough for that to be swept under the carpet by any manner of means.

Caroline Nokes: I do not think there has been any attempt to sweep that under the carpet. There was an urgent question in the House on the matter—I think it was the week before last—and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman raised his point then, but he knows as well as I do that his question is best addressed to the Cabinet Office, which is responsible for elections, not me as the Immigration Minister.

Alongside the White Paper on the future borders and immigration system that we published last year, the borders, immigration and citizenship system continues to deliver, to secure the UK border, control immigration and provide world-class services that contribute to our prosperity.

The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) talked with regret about the immigration system, but it is worth reminding the House of some salient points about its successes. In the year to March, more people came to the UK, with 142.8 million passengers arriving here; the number of visitor visas granted was at a record high of 2.3 million, an increase of 9%; 181,000 people were given entry clearance to come to work in the UK and bolster the UK's economy; 358,000 students came to the UK to study; over 5,700 people were provided with protection and support through our four UK resettlement schemes; over 5,600 family reunion visas were issued, over 2,700 of which were for children; and 89,000 people were granted settlement, with 149,000 granted British citizenship.

The majority of the people I have referred to engage with the immigration system in a smooth way. They are contributing to the growth of tourism and our economy, attending our world-leading universities and enriching our culture. I do not believe that there is any great difference in aspiration between the Scottish National party and the UK Government on the topic of students. We both recognise that international students make a huge contribution to our education institutions socially, academically and financially. We want our education sector to flourish and to see ever increasing numbers of international students coming to the UK. Indeed, the Government have set an ambition of increasing the number of international students in higher education to 600,000 by 2030.

Where there may be a difference is that the Government are keen to share our successes and send the message that the UK is welcoming, while the SNP sadly seems determined to convey a sense of gloom. I am pleased to say that the facts support the Government's position. The number of visa applications to study at the UK's universities increased by 10% last year, to the highest number ever recorded, and visa application numbers are 27% higher than they were in 2011. There are close to half a million international students studying in the UK, and we continue to be the second most popular destination in the world for them. I hope that SNP Members will join in celebrating that success.

While we are on the subject of facts, I note that the motion calls for a policy “based on evidence”. The House will be aware that last year the Migration Advisory Committee—the Government's expert, non-partisan

advisers on immigration matters—carried out a detailed study into international students. The MAC took evidence from a wide variety of stakeholders representing every part of the United Kingdom, including Scotland. As the MAC indicates, 140 written responses were submitted to its call for evidence. This is absolutely evidence-based policy making.

Pete Wishart: We all know that the MAC does entirely what the Government want it to do. Is it not absurd that we educate international students to a high standard and then boot them out, because there is no post-study work scheme? I was in Montreal with the Scottish Affairs Committee just the other week, where they do everything possible to encourage their students to stay, because they have devolution of immigration policy. Should Scotland not have some of that too?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman has perhaps not read the White Paper and seen the additional offer that the Government are making to international students on post-study work. He would do well to read it. He said that the MAC only gives the Government evidence that we want to hear—far from it. He is falling into the trap of being interested in evidence when it suits him.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Nokes: No, I will not.

The MAC concluded both that students should not be removed from the net migration target and that there should be no increase in the length of time that undergraduates are allowed to remain in the UK on completion of their studies. The MAC said:

“We do not recommend a separate post-study work visa”.

I look forward to the SNP's endorsement of those positions, or are they interested in evidence-based policy making only when the evidence happens to support their pre-conceived notions?

The Government have decided to go beyond the MAC's recommendations. In our White Paper, we committed to increasing the period of post-study leave for both undergraduates and master's students because, as I have said, we want our education sector to continue to flourish and to compete strongly on the international stage.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Nokes: No, I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman again.

Evidence-based policy making is the principle that our future borders and immigration system will be built upon. It will be a single immigration system, where it is workers' skills that matter, not where they come from.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for giving way. She referred to evidence-based policy making. Does she recognise that the Fresh Talent initiative introduced by a previous First Minister of Scotland, Lord McConnell, which he credits as his single most effective achievement in office, contributed to reversing Scotland's historic population decline?

Caroline Nokes: That is an interesting point, because I think we heard from the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East that what had reversed Scotland's population decline was free movement, with people being able to come in from the EU.

The future system will focus on high skills, welcoming talented and hard-working individuals who will support the UK's dynamic economy and enabling employers to compete on the world stage. In line with the MAC's recommendation, we will prioritise the migrants who bring the most benefit to the UK, maximising the benefits of immigration. This week, we asked the MAC to review and advise on salary thresholds, including whether there is a case for regional salary thresholds, and we are currently engaging with businesses and employers from all parts of the UK and all sectors of the economy to ensure that the future immigration system is suitable for their needs.

Thangam Debbonaire: The Minister is generous to give way. She mentioned high-skilled migration. Has there been reflection in her Department, and perhaps in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development, about the impact on other countries of us focusing on taking their high-skilled migrants? I am not saying that there is an easy answer—I do not think there is—but I wonder whether that has been a consideration across Departments.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady is right to refer to that. It is important that we consider our immigration system in the round, and particularly when it comes to doctors and nurses. I am very conscious that while we welcome and attract people working in the medical profession from around the globe, many of them come from countries where those skills are sorely needed. In fact, we know that many of them return to their home countries, having gained experience and knowledge here. It is important that we work with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, DFID and the Department for Education on determining future immigration policy, because when it comes to our workforce needs, immigration simply cannot be the only answer.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Minister says she wants to work with business, which I am very pleased to hear. Does she agree with the director of the Confederation of British Industry in Scotland, who said:

“The proposals outlined in the White Paper don't meet Scotland's needs or the needs of the UK as a whole, and would be a sucker punch for many firms right across the country”?

Caroline Nokes: I gently point out to the hon. and learned Lady that I am spending this year engaging with businesses and business organisations. Just yesterday, I had the pleasure of meeting people working in the hospitality industry in Cumbria, such as in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison). It is absolutely imperative that we take forward the White Paper, and we always said there would be a year of engagement and of listening to views.

The hon. and learned Lady must acknowledge that we have asked the Migration Advisory Committee to look again at salary thresholds because it is important that we get this right. As I said at the outset, this is one of the biggest changes in our immigration system for

[*Caroline Nokes*]

45 years, and it is imperative that we listen to the concerns of all sectors of the economy, and of all regions and countries.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The last intervention included a selective quote from CBI Scotland. To be fair, the CBI, the Food and Drink Federation Scotland, the Scottish Chambers of Commerce and the National Farmers Union Scotland have all said that they want an all-UK solution when it comes to our future immigration schemes. They do not want the devolution of those powers to the Scottish Government—least of all, it might be said, to this Scottish Government.

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. He will be conscious that, when we are looking for cross-party consensus, there are several across the House who agree with me and him that we should have one immigration policy for the whole of the United Kingdom.

The future system needs to uphold our international obligations in relation to asylum, and to support decisions based on human rights. As I set out last week, we continue to work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to resettle the most vulnerable people from areas of conflict. We have resettled almost 16,000 people since 2015, nearly 3,000 of whom have been resettled in Scotland. In our new consolidated scheme, starting in 2020, we are committed to resettling about 5,000 of the world's most vulnerable refugees every year. That strategy is to prevent vulnerable people from falling into the hands of traffickers and making dangerous journeys across both land and sea.

It is firmly our view that people should claim asylum in the first safe country, not the last, but where people are in genuine need of our protection, we will provide it. I am proud that this Government have given protection to over 66,000 people since June 2010. Where an individual does not meet our immigration rules or our obligations under international law, I make no apology for making and enforcing decisions that the public expect as a matter of fairness.

Peter Grant: May I take the Minister back to her comments on the Migration Advisory Committee? I note with interest that she wants us to accept everything that committee says, but seems reluctant to accept the findings of a House of Commons Select Committee. The creation of the Select Committees was celebrated by Mr Speaker not so long ago.

Can the Minister tell us which member of the Migration Advisory Committee has direct experience of the impact of migration in Scotland? I have just looked at the committee's website, and there is no doubt that all its members are very august experts in their own field, but none of them has a job anywhere further north than York and, as far as I can tell from the potted biographies, none of them has ever worked in any of the devolved nations of the United Kingdom. Is it any surprise that we should get an Anglocentric set of recommendations from such an Anglocentric committee? If that is not true, will the Minister tell us the name of the member of the Migration Advisory Committee who has direct experience of working in Scotland and seeing how migration affects Scotland today?

Caroline Nokes: I will take the hon. Gentleman back to the responses from Scotland to the consultation undertaken by the committee, which has held events in every region and every nation of the United Kingdom. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman does not like the fact that the Migration Advisory Committee is made up of the most eminent experts there are in the country, but he will be aware that when we recruit to a vacant position on the MAC, which happens every few years, we are of course open to applications from every part of the United Kingdom, including Scotland.

The UK's measures on access to work, benefits and services have been in place and developed over many years of varying and successive Governments, and are consistent with the legislative frameworks operated by most other comparable countries. Opposition Members should be reminded that other EU member states are subject to an EU directive requiring them to have in place right to work checks and sanctions for employers of illegal workers, to protect potential victims of modern slavery.

Measures to restrict access to benefits and services are also designed to protect the taxpayer—a legitimate objective that has public support. A YouGov poll last year found that 71% of people support a policy of requiring people to show documents proving their right to be here in order to do things such as taking up employment, renting a flat or opening a bank account. Measures on the right to work and the right to rent are about tackling unscrupulous employers and landlords to protect the vulnerable, while also protecting good employers and landlords. That is in the interests of a prosperous and fair society that supports those who play by the rules, as well as protecting those who might otherwise be exploited. However, we are clear that these measures must distinguish effectively between those with lawful status, who are entitled to access work, benefits and services in the UK, and those who are here illegally. The Home Office is committed to improving how we meet the differing needs of the public we serve.

Stuart C. McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Nokes: I am tempted not to give way, because later this afternoon I will be asking for the leave of the House to wind up the debate as well as open it. That will give me an opportunity to respond to points that Members have made in their contributions, which I hope will be more helpful than simply responding to an intervention.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. It may be helpful to say that somebody might object, which would prevent that from happening, so I think the Minister ought to show generosity now.

Caroline Nokes indicated assent.

Stuart C. McDonald: Well, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Will she address head-on the High Court decision that the right to rent scheme is causing terrible discrimination in the housing market? How can she possibly defend the Home Office decision to appeal that on the grounds that the discrimination is justified in any way, shape or form?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Home Office is appealing that judgment, and given that there is live litigation, it would not be appropriate for me to comment at this point.

As I have said, we want our systems to become as simple and straightforward as possible. During the engagement I have held with employers on the White Paper over the last six months, I have been very conscious of the point the hon. Gentleman made about small and medium-sized enterprises, and the challenges they may find in engaging with the tier 2 sponsorship process. It is absolutely the Home Office's intention to make all our systems far more straightforward and streamlined, and the comments I have received from employers will certainly enable us to build a system that I hope will be both responsive and quick. A challenge has been set—I think it was in the Chancellor's Budget—that we want to be in a situation to determine the equivalent of tier 2 visas within two to three weeks. That will be a dramatic improvement, and one that I hope users of the system, and indeed small businesses, will welcome.

Thangam Debbonaire: The Minister is being incredibly generous in giving way, and I am very grateful to her. She mentioned engagement with employers, which is of course the right thing to do. Will she consider public engagement, of the sort that Hope not Hate and British Future have carried out over the last two years, in the course of developing and expanding the policy and turning the White Paper into concrete measures? Bringing the British people with her would be the right thing to do.

Caroline Nokes: Yes, certainly. I have mentioned the engagement with employers, and over the last few months we have also been meeting non-governmental organisations and academia. Indeed, in the hon. Lady's own city of Bristol, we held a roundtable that was well attended by representatives of Bristol University, which is very keen that the voice of the student should be heard, as well as the voice of the institution. It is important that we continue to engage and listen to voices from across the entire country.

We are marshalling our reforms under three key themes: improving our customer service and responding more effectively to the individual needs of people who interact with the system; making sure that we respond better to vulnerable individuals who interact with our system, including by ensuring that our processes are accessible; and ensuring we are an open organisation that listens and responds when our customers and staff identify problems, using feedback to design our policies and procedures and to understand their impact.

The EU settlement scheme embodies those principles. We have listened and responded, building on the feedback that we received through the extensive stakeholder engagement and the two public beta phases before its launch in March. The customer experience is where we want the future system to be. The scheme is fully digital and genuinely world leading because applicants can validate their identity using their mobile device—including Apple customers later this year—and are provided with a secure digital status that, unlike a physical document, cannot be lost, stolen or tampered with.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), who is no longer in his place, made the point about those who have only Apple, not Android, phones, and about how the broadband coverage in his constituency makes uploading documents difficult. I would say to him that his constituents do not have to travel on a 500 mile round trip to Edinburgh, because

the postal route opened on 30 March in time to coincide with the original planned date of leaving the European Union.

The motion talks about rejecting the requirement for EU citizens to apply for settled and pre-settled status, but a declaratory system, under which they automatically acquired an immigration status, would significantly reduce any incentive to obtain evidence of that status. It would risk creating confusion among employers and service providers, and would have the effect of impeding EU citizens' access to benefits and services to which they were entitled.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Minister talks about confusion among employers. In the highlands, in my constituency, the confusion among employers is over where they are going to source staff, as people have been chased off by the hostile measures taken by this Government. Is it not time to say that people in the highlands, who are just highlanders, should just be able to stay in their homes?

Caroline Nokes: On EU settled status, we have absolutely said to our EU friends, neighbours and colleagues not just, "You can stay," but, "We want you to stay." That is an important message, which I will continue repeating both in the House and outside it.

We have put in place a system that is simple and straightforward. In the vast majority of cases, people's applications are being determined within one to four working days, and satisfaction with the scheme is high. We are at a point where well over 800,000 people have been through the scheme, and it is important that we continue to move from the current phase to making sure that as many as possible access their status. That is why we have put in place up to £9 million of funding for 57 voluntary and community organisations across the UK to help us to reach out to an estimated 200,000 vulnerable or at-risk EU citizens and help them apply. There are over 300 assisted digital locations across the UK, where people can be supported through their application, and it is important to reflect the fact that the scheme is working. Furthermore, it has been built at pace, is successfully delivering in large volumes, and is protecting vulnerable individuals, which demonstrates how the Home Office is building for the future.

I am proud to serve as Immigration Minister at this time of unprecedented change, during which we are engaging with stakeholders right across the country to build our future borders and immigration system, and I very much look forward to hearing further contributions from hon. Members this afternoon.

2.1 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The motion raises a broad and important range of topics. My speech will equally take a broad approach to the Prime Minister's legacy on immigration, but I will try not to detain the House too long, as I am aware that a number of Back Benchers wish to contribute.

As we look back on the Prime Minister's tenure as Home Secretary, and then as Prime Minister, we reflect on the fact that she was the architect of a cruel and ineffective immigration system that will reverberate through the lives of our constituents for generations. The coalition Government made two pledges that would set the course

[Afzal Khan]

of the UK's immigration policy for a decade. The first was to bring down net migration to the tens of thousands. This bogus target was backed up by no research or rationale, apart from being a good soundbite. It has done harm to our economy and led to the scapegoating of migrants, and it has never been met.

The net migration target drove the Government to restrict access for international students. International students generate over £25 billion for our economy. They contribute to our culture and society and to soft power abroad, not to mention the fact that they subsidise university fees for UK students. Labour has called for international students to be taken out of net migration numbers.

The second pledge was to create a “really hostile environment”. The Government cut the Border Force, and they turned teachers, doctors and landlords into immigration officers. The hostile environment policy culminated in the Windrush crisis. Labour warned from the start that the hostile environment would lead to discrimination, and that is exactly what has happened.

In March, the High Court ruled that the right to rent scheme directly causes landlords to discriminate against prospective tenants on racial and nationality grounds, and furthermore that the Government have provided no evidence that it actually achieves their stated aim—to reduce illegal migration.

The high cost of our immigration system is part and parcel of the hostile environment. This morning, the British Medical Association called on the Government to scrap up-front charging for migrants using the NHS, as it causes discrimination and people are being denied urgent and essential care. When the coalition Government were bringing in the hostile environment, they co-ordinated a cross-departmental, focused and strategic approach to denying services to migrants, but since Windrush we have seen no such serious attempt to remedy this great injustice.

We were promised a compensation scheme “within two weeks” when the scandal broke, but it took the Government over a year to set it up. Only 13 people have received payments from the emergency hardship fund. Now we have the compensation scheme, it is extremely difficult to navigate. The form totals 18 pages; the burden of proof is high; and there is a severe lack of help and advice for a generation of people who are, in general, unused to using the internet.

It is a scandal that the scheme does not compensate those who have been wrongfully deported. The Government's guidance says

“it is difficult to determine whether inability to return to the UK is a loss”.

What an absurd statement. Of course losing your home, being separated from family and being sent to an unfamiliar country is a loss.

Meanwhile, victims of Windrush are tragically passing away before they can get justice. Over the weekend, *The Guardian* reported that Richard Stewart had died without an apology or compensation. He was a prominent Windrush campaigner who moved to the UK as a British subject in 1955, but was told in 2012 that he would need to pay £1,200 to naturalise. He could not afford to pay that.

Many victims of Windrush were wrongly locked up in immigration detention. The UK's immigration detention system is a stain on our national conscience. We are the only country in Europe that detains people indefinitely. We must have a 28-day time limit on immigration detention. Our amendment to the immigration Bill has strong, cross-party support and sends the message that this House demands an end to indefinite detention. Labour has called for the closure of the Yarl's Wood and Brook House detention centres—two names synonymous with mistreatment and abuse. We will also review the entire detention estate and consider whether we need to close Dungavel detention centre in Scotland.

We now face a potential repeat of Windrush for EU citizens. Labour has voted against the Tory immigration Bill, which would end freedom of movement. It is foolish and reckless to change our immigration system in this way without first knowing what our future relationship with the EU will be.

Mr Sweeney: I welcome my hon. Friend's announcement of the Labour party's intention to close the Dungavel detention centre, which is a shameful stain on this nation's conscience, as are all our detention centres—extrajudicial detention without recourse to proper justice.

Does my hon. Friend recognise the practice of the Home Office of moving people around different detention centres around the UK so that they are not able to access friends, family or any sort of legal representation? That is a shameful act, and it should be stopped immediately by the Home Office.

Afzal Khan: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and I agree with him.

In Labour's first Opposition day debate after the 2016 referendum, we called on the Government to unilaterally guarantee the rights of EU nationals. If the Government had done this, we could have avoided the situation where, four months before we face a cliff edge, millions of EU citizens are still in limbo.

The SNP supported our amendment to the immigration Bill, which would make settled status a declaratory system, so EU citizens living in the UK would be automatically granted settled status, rather than having to apply for it. In rejecting a declaratory scheme, the Government often make the argument that the process in 1973 for the Windrush generation was declaratory, so we should make people apply to avoid a repeat of Windrush. I believe that that argument shows the Government have learned the wrong lessons from Windrush.

The Government are saying that Windrush people were illegally detained and deported, because they did not have the proper papers to prove they were in the UK legally. With EU citizens, the Government have decided to create a situation where people will still be detained and deported, but that will be legal because they have not applied for settled status in time. Just as the Government are not fulfilling their obligations to EU citizens, they are not fulfilling their humanitarian obligations to refugees.

The Prime Minister has consistently failed the most vulnerable child refugees. Even when forced to resettle children under the Dubs amendment, the Government closed the scheme after just 480 children had been resettled, rather than the 3,000 originally envisioned. Despite repeated calls from non-governmental organisations

and MPs and a vote on the Floor of the House, the Government have failed to expand refugee family reunion. These rules have been under review for over a year. They do not require legislation to be enacted, and they would make an immeasurable difference to the lives of refugees in the UK. As we move beyond the failures of the past, we must start building an idea of what new immigration policy will meet the needs of our economy and build prosperity.

In December, the Government published a White Paper on immigration. Their own economic analysis predicts that the proposals would cost between £2 billion and £4 billion over the first five years. The proposed £30,000 salary threshold, in particular, would severely limit access to labour that many sectors in our economy desperately need. The health and social care sector is dealing with serious workforce shortages, while demand is increasing. Across the UK, four in five European economic area employees working full-time in social care would have been ineligible to work in the UK under the proposed system. In Scotland, less than 10% of those in caring personal service occupations earn above £25,000, and none earns £30,000.

Labour and the SNP agree on our diagnosis of a broken immigration system. However, we do not agree entirely on the cure. The SNP has argued for a devolved immigration system, where Scotland is given the power to determine its own immigration rules. We believe this approach would be unenforceable, because there would be no way to distinguish between those who have a visa under the Scottish system and those who have a visa for the rest of the UK. We would either need visa checks along Hadrian's Wall or we would have to rely on the hostile environment. Neither option is acceptable. Under a Labour Government, a devolved immigration system would be unnecessary. Our immigration system will be flexible and based on the needs of our economy, including Scotland's, not on bogus migration targets.

In conclusion, the Prime Minister's legacy will be a cruel and hostile immigration policy, which has harmed our economy and caused the Windrush crisis. Whoever is our next Prime Minister, they must commit to ending the hostile environment and introduce a 28-day time limit on immigration detention.

Joanna Cherry: I cannot let the hon. Gentleman move on from his statement about the impossibility of enforcing a differential immigration system within the United Kingdom without asking him what steps the Labour party has taken to look at other systems, such as the system within the Canadian federation, which operates perfectly satisfactorily without border checks, and I remind him that Hadrian's Wall does not actually run along the border.

Afzal Khan: I have already said that our immigration system will be flexible and based on the needs of our economy, including Scotland's.

Whoever is Prime Minister must make settled status a declaratory system, scrap the £30,000 salary threshold and uphold our humanitarian obligations to refugees. This country has a great amount to offer and to gain from migration, and that should be celebrated.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I suggest to Members that we work on about 10 minutes each to make sure everybody gets equal time.

2.14 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for your forbearance in allowing me to speak at this point in the debate.

Let me first say that I appreciated the tone and much of the content of the speech delivered by the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). He took a very measured approach to some of the issues that I think across the House we recognise are matters of concern. However, in response to the Minister's opening remarks and the interventions she suffered from the SNP, it was clear that when it comes to this matter, as in so many other matters, the SNP's position is, in my view, tedious.

SNP Members, as they always do, frame the debate around the constitution: whether decisions should be made in Edinburgh or London. That is what dominates their thinking. That is what gets them most excited, as we have seen in this debate. In doing so, they have, as they always do, let down Scotland. Their voices should be standing up for their constituencies, telling us about the needs of their communities and their businesses. Instead, they use this as an opportunity to talk on and on about independence; about how, if we had independence, we could have everything we ever wanted and it would all be perfect. It is the age-old tactic of those who sell snake oil. The fact is that the people of Scotland told them exactly what they think of the SNP's independence plans in 2014. They want none of it and they want us, as Scottish MPs, to get on with the job of representing Scotland's interests within the UK.

Chris Stephens: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Will he tell me what is tedious about an intervention raising the issue of Serco, a multinational company, being willing in the next couple of months to throw 300 asylum seekers out in the street? Does he not share my concern that there is something wrong with Government policy in that regard?

Stephen Kerr: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I was referring, as he well knows, to the interventions we have heard since, which have focused again on the SNP's never-ending neverendum desires for Scotland.

Joanna Cherry: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He says that we should be representing the interests of our constituents. I assure him that my constituents have written to me in their hundreds about their desire to stay in the single market and their desire to keep freedom of movement. Businesses in my constituency tell me that they want that. The two major universities in Edinburgh South West, Heriot-Watt and Napier, want to keep freedom of movement, too. So may I just suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he shows a little bit more respect for SNP Members and the efforts we make to represent the views of our constituents? He may tell us that people in Stirling do not care about freedom of movement, but that is not my understanding from the way they voted in 2016. Can he just show a bit more respect?

Stephen Kerr: The hon. and learned Lady talks about respect, but what I heard from the Westminster leader of the SNP at Prime Minister's questions was a very long way away from respect. In two successive PMQs,

[Stephen Kerr]

last week and this week, the Westminster leader of the SNP accused a serving Member of this House of being a racist, and today it was said, without any challenge, that the same right hon. Member who serves in this House had made a career out of telling lies. So let us not hear anything about respect from SNP Members.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I think the Chair said something about it previously. I was not in the Chair at the time. Mr Speaker did not hear it. I do not want to get into a debate about it.

Stephen Kerr: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The truth is that this debate is a great opportunity to talk about the positive side of immigration: to talk about how people have come from all over the world to make their home here in the United Kingdom and in Scotland in particular, and how they make an invaluable contribution to our communities and our economy. But the SNP never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity.

Luckily, Government Members have heard already how immigration policy can be run at a UK level to take account of the local and sectoral issues throughout our economy. I would like to add my voice to those genuinely speaking up for Scotland, rather than casting around for more grievance and more excuses to talk about constitutional politics. Simply transferring responsibility for Scotland's immigration to Holyrood, as the SNP proposes, entirely misses the point of how a UK-wide approach will ensure a positive environment to attract the very people our economy needs.

We cannot afford to have different systems operating in the United Kingdom, where people must be able to move freely around. I referred earlier to the various hugely influential voices in Scotland on this issue—the director of CBI Scotland, Tracy Black, the Food and Drink Federation Scotland, the Scottish Chambers of Commerce and NFU Scotland—who are saying that we should use Scotland's influence to lead a UK-wide system that meets our needs. That is exactly what I am trying to do by making this contribution.

The proposals for a future immigration policy, however, as laid out in the White Paper, will cause real damage to the UK economy and must be changed. The truth is that the diverse needs within Scotland need to be accommodated within a flexible policy framework based on reality, rather than on an academic theory. Scotland's needs for an immigration policy are the same as those in any other part of the UK. In our fishing communities in the north-east of Scotland, we find similar issues to those in communities in the south-west of England. In our industrial heartlands in central Scotland, we find the same issues as in the west midlands of England. In places such as Stirling, with its rural agricultural base and tourist attractions, we find the same issues as in Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cornwall and many other parts of England.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman says that there are no differences, except that England has developed an immigration issue because of population growth. The problem is that Scotland has a set population, with a diminishing working-age population. He quotes directors and business, but what about NHS Scotland? We need more people.

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Lady is well aware that every social attitudes survey conducted shows that attitudes to immigration in Scotland mirror those across the United Kingdom. We Conservative Members are speaking up for the positive benefits of immigration.

If someone is running a hotel and looking for staff in Callander, the chances are that they have the same issues as someone running a hotel in Penrith or Penzance. The people who work in these industries—hospitality, tourism, food production, manufacturing, social care and many more—cannot be described as unskilled. Meet the people who make whisky and find out about how they make their product, and tell me that they are unskilled. They are not, yet the White Paper produced by the Government tells us that everyone who earns under £30,000 is assumed to be unskilled. The average salary in Scotland is £22,980. I would not begin to think, let alone say, that the average Scottish worker is unskilled. Herein lies the problem of relying on an arbitrary salary level to determine a policy. Whatever number is chosen, it is subjective and the methodology used to reach it is open to question and dissection.

Some of the most skilled people I know earn less than £30,000 a year. To call them unskilled labour is a travesty. Nothing could be further from the truth. I am sorry, but relying on the wisdom of a panel of academics, however learned they may be, none of whom, by the way, is resident in or has a connection with Scotland, and none of whom seems to have any connection with the country north of Watford Gap—that is what I thought, but apparently it is York—is not a wise approach. I am a critic of the Government's approach on this. The White Paper on the Migration Advisory Committee report is a cut-and-paste job. Admittedly, it is expert-led, but where was the demonstrable use of critical faculties? Where was the consideration of all parts of the United Kingdom? Where was the Union test?

Speaking for myself, it is hard to discern what test was applied before the Government published their White Paper. If the Government publish a White Paper, it is not unfair to say that this is the starting position for Government policy. What is really needed is a system that is adaptive to the needs of specific sectors. We need to get under the skin of the UK economy and understand the needs of our businesses. Where they cannot plug gaps using training or automation, need seasonal staff or need a high supply of specific skills that are in short supply in the UK, those should be the drivers behind our immigration target, not an arbitrary salary figure. Only an economist cloistered in the halls of academe, with their theories and assumptions, would begin to consider this measure to be adequate.

As we move towards new leadership, I hope that our Government, Prime Minister and country will move in the direction of an immigration policy that will seek to meet the needs of our country dynamically. It needs to be an adaptive policy that changes as the needs of business and our economy change. Furthermore, we need to ensure that we attract talent. We should want to attract talent to our country—people who will want to settle here, make their homes and careers here, who are skilled, who work hard and who are ambitious for themselves, their families and their communities. These are the people we should welcome and encourage to make their homes here.

In conclusion, these issues are pertinent to Scotland, the whole United Kingdom and our economy. However, by focusing on constitutional arguments, as the SNP continues to do on every issue, it lets Scotland down. It fails to stand up for Scotland's interests in the United Kingdom. We need positive engagement on immigration, a rational debate and an acknowledgement that the current proposals are not workable.

2.26 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): It is sometimes a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), but I am not so sure today. I was struck by his description of the arguments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) as “tedious”, by his use of the term “snake oil” and by his talking, as ever, at the end of his speech about the obsession with the constitution. It dawned on me that I have heard this speech before: it is his single, transferable British nationalist rant. It then dawned on me—this is something I thought I would never say—that my length of service in this House is almost twice the combined service of all the Tory Back Benchers here, including the Parliamentary Private Secretary. We will have to have another debate about immigration when the grown-up, experienced MPs from the Tory party can be bothered to do their jobs.

Douglas Ross: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Hosie: No, I will not on that point.

I am delighted to be called in this debate. I am pleased that it does not simply focus on the Prime Minister's toxic legacy on immigration and the hostile environment that she and her hapless Government created, but recognises the positive contribution that immigrants and immigration bring to the country. In this debate, in this Chamber and in the country, I am sure that there will be positive discussion about how we improve the system to make it far more humane and—this is where I agree with the hon. Member for Stirling—far less arbitrary than it is at present. I am also pleased that the motion specifically references Scottish needs on immigration, both for demographic and different economic sectoral reasons. This is important, particularly for Scotland's growth sectors, which I will say more about in a moment, along with making a small number of other specific points.

I note the value and benefit that migrants, and EU migrants in particular, bring to the economy and I will cite four of Scotland's growth sectors to demonstrate that. In Scotland alone, in the food, drink and agriculture sector, 10,000 EU migrants are employed. That is 12% of total employment in the sector. One in eight people working in that entire sector is an EU or EEA worker. In tourism in Scotland, there are 17,000 EU workers, which is 9.5% of the total employment in that sector. In the creative sector, there are 10,000. Even in finance and business services, 9,000 workers—or 4% of the total employment in that growth sector—are from the European Union. That is before there is any mention of the contribution that migrants and migrant workers make to health and other vital public services. It is clear from those few examples that any attempt to constrain or restrict the flow of EU labour in any way would be profoundly damaging for businesses in Scotland. Their costs

would undoubtedly rise—that is, if alternatives could be found at all—and output, particularly in agriculture, would most certainly suffer.

My second point is that inward migration delivers almost all the net population growth expected for Scotland. Without it, over the medium term, the population would remain static, but have a higher proportion of older people. Migration is therefore vital to ensuring that the proportion of working-age people is maintained, so that there are people to do the jobs that need to be done, and to pay the taxes to fund the public services on which we rely.

The Government's argument is that there is still a mechanism in place for people to come, and the Minister spoke about the number of people coming to the EU in various capacities, but all sorts of skilled labour—not just highly paid skilled labour—is mobile; that is how it can come to Scotland, and to the UK. If we put up barriers, be they real, hard, financial, or even soft, perceived barriers, we limit the number of people who want to and can come to Scotland, because it might simply be easier for them to go elsewhere.

Dr Whitford: My hon. Friend talks about soft barriers. There has been a 90% drop in nurses coming from the EU, even though they are not obstructed as yet. Is that not a sign that people go elsewhere if they feel unwelcome?

Stewart Hosie: That is precisely my point. If that drop in numbers continued for more than a few years, the health service and other caring sectors would have a serious problem. It is not simply EU citizens but all migrants—all new Scots—who deliver benefit to our country. I will concentrate a little more on EU and European economic area citizens, but I will shortly move on to the contribution made, and the problems faced, by people from beyond the European Union who come here, either permanently or for short visits.

We should be thankful to the Government for the publication of “EU Exit: Long-term economic analysis”, which puts a hard GDP number on the benefit from EEA migration. We know that Brexit is bad economically, but every single non-EEA Brexit scenario modelled, including no deal, average free trade agreement, and the now lost and forgotten Government White Paper, was worse with a zero net inflow of EEA workers—around 2% of GDP worse over the forecast period. Net zero EEA migration has a hard-number impact; we know that, as do the Government, because they published it.

No one who cares about the economic wellbeing of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland or the UK as a whole should ever embark on a hostile environment policy that makes it difficult for people to come to the UK, or that in any way, shape or form stops EEA citizens living or working here, yet that is precisely what the Government have done, and it is not only EEA citizens who suffer.

I will give two brief examples of the unnecessary and arbitrary obstacles faced by people who wish to live here permanently or make a short visit. The first is of a South African lady who married a Scottish man who lived and worked in South Africa more than 15 years ago. They moved to Scotland. The lady travelled initially on a tourist visa, but was told that she had to go back to South Africa, where they no longer had a home, job or income, to apply for a UK visa. That obviously caused

[*Stewart Hosie*]

distress, and had a significant financial cost to a household with modest earnings. Forcing that lady to return to South Africa to apply for a visa that would allow her to live in Scotland with her husband delivered absolutely no benefit to the UK. It was a nasty, pointless, arbitrary and unnecessary piece of hostile bureaucracy that could be changed tomorrow if this Government cared anything for the people who live here.

The second example I wish to give is of a very successful Pakistani gentleman. He travels regularly overseas and has never overstayed on a visa in any country. Indeed, on his last visit to the UK, he left after only a couple of weeks, having visited all the friends and family whom he wished to see, which was the reason for his stay. Even though he had an excellent sponsor and an exemplary record from previous visits, his last visa application was rejected—and not on what you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I or a reasonable person would consider real grounds; he was told, wrongly, that he did not have

“enough incentive to leave the UK on completion of”

his

“proposed visit”.

Indefensible! That arbitrary judgment was handed down by some bureaucrat in the absence of any evidence whatever.

Weddings and funerals are missed, and family relations are destroyed, because of ludicrous, arbitrary decision making. If these decisions were made by some tin-pot despotic country, we would all rightly say, “That’s appalling. The rule of law has been abandoned in favour of arbitrary decision making.”

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): My hon. Friend talks about evidence being ignored. In many cases, significant, substantial evidence is not just ignored, but thrown out and abandoned. What is the point of the Government even attempting to collate a portfolio of evidence if it is to be completely ignored by decision makers?

Stewart Hosie: Every MP must have examples of fantastic applications being rejected, even when submitted with every conceivable relevant piece of paper and certificate on the planet, and even when there is a brilliant, solvent sponsor, so my hon. Friend is right. That is the nub of what this Government’s hostile environment has delivered. It has brought about economic harm and ludicrous net migration targets, ignores the social and cultural benefits of immigration, and strips much-needed staff from Scotland’s growth sectors.

The UK has in essence abandoned an evidence-based, rules-based immigration system in favour of arbitrary decision making that panders to the screeching headlines of the right-wing, Brexiteer-friendly press, but that causes, and will continue to cause, real distress to real people and their families, and ongoing economic harm.

2.37 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. The opening remarks of the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) were constructive in tone and content, although I may not have agreed with them all.

Leaving the European Union provides us with a unique opportunity to reshape and maximise the benefits of immigration to the UK, through a sensible, fairer system that nurtures talent at home while attracting the best talent from around the world for the benefit of the UK economy. Although I wholeheartedly welcome the skills-based approach to immigration in the White Paper, it failed to recognise the differing immigration needs of sectors in different parts of the country. One of the many criticisms of the European Union was its blanket approach to regulation; what was right in one part of the European Union was not always right in the other. We should not lose sight of that, or make the same mistakes in the United Kingdom.

As a Scottish Conservative, let me say that I am unashamedly pro-immigration. People from across the world have made East Renfrewshire their home. Immigration is good, necessary and desirable; we want it, and we need it. I also discard the notion that migrants are somehow solely responsible for pressures on our public services and the housing market. The reason people cannot get a GP appointment in East Renfrewshire has nothing to do with an influx of eastern Europeans, and everything to do with the Scottish National party’s woeful handling of health matters in the Scottish Parliament. Blaming problems in our personal lives and in the nation’s life on migrants is lazy and wrong.

Turning to the White Paper, it is vital to regional and sectoral economies across the United Kingdom that our approach to immigration be flexible, based on evidence, and not one-size-fits-all. Many of Scotland’s key sectors—food and drink, oil and gas, fisheries and agriculture—have real and specific needs. I think that the failure to recognise that was one of the reasons the White Paper was met with such hostility and negativity from various groups and business and industry leaders across Scotland.

As has already been discussed, under the current proposals, to be granted a work visa a migrant must secure a job paying at least £30,000 a year. I am not sure who that threshold was designed for, but it was certainly not designed for the labour market in Scotland, or, presumably, for any other labour market outside London and the south-east. While it would be great if average earnings were £30,000 a year, that is not where we are as an economy. It is important to remember that salary and skills are not the same thing, as is frequently demonstrated in this place.

Fisheries, agriculture, hospitality and care jobs range from low to medium-skilled. They are industries that depend heavily on migrant workers, and they do not pay anywhere near £30,000. It would, of course, be brilliant if we could see more domestic workers going into such professions in the future, but, in the short term, if those industries are to operate as they do now they will need continued relatively easy access to labour. I welcome the Home Office’s reflection on the £30,000 figure, but I question the legitimacy of an arbitrary threshold, and I am not sure that regional differentiation is the answer. Personally, I should prefer a uniform threshold at a lower level: a threshold of about £18,000 might be sensible.

Similar logic applies to student visas. Under the current proposals, the UK will offer leave to remain under student visas to last for three years. Given that a normal undergraduate degree course in Scotland lasts

for four years, that proposal is clearly hopeless and needs to be changed, as I think the Home Office has already recognised.

Overseas students not only choose to invest large sums in higher education across the UK, but spend significant sums while they are here, contributing growth to the economy and adding to indirect taxation revenue. I do not want to see a student visa system that incentivises overseas students to pick universities elsewhere in the UK while Scotland potentially misses out on those benefits simply because it structures its degrees slightly differently. We should also consider the longer-term benefits of retaining highly skilled students in the UK jobs market, including the benefits to our economy. We need an immigration system that nurtures the best talent to remain in the UK, deploying the skills gained here, rather than encouraging a brain-drain to the detriment of our economy, whether in Scotland or in the rest of the UK. I therefore think that post-study work visa schemes should be a priority.

We on the Scottish Affairs Committee have done a great deal of cross-party work in this regard, considering in particular the issues of changing demographics in Scotland and depopulation issues. Thanks to the Government's record, we have pretty much full employment, so the idea that gaps can be filled by our growing the "indigenous workforce"—or whatever the term is—is a fantasy. Technology takes time, and only goes so far; we need, and will always need, people to come to our country to work. However, we must also ask ourselves why a smaller percentage of those coming to the UK from the EU come to Scotland than should be the case on the basis of our population.

What we desperately need, both in this Chamber and in the one up the road, is a mature debate on why fewer people than we want and expect come to Scotland, why people leave, and what meaningful action both Governments can take in the years ahead to change that. What we do not need is the attitude of Fergus Ewing, one of the Scottish Government's Cabinet Secretaries. When it was pointed out to him that evidence given to the Scottish Affairs Committee about the seasonal agriculture workforce showed that some people in Bucharest had said that they were not very interested in coming to Scotland to pick soft fruits, he said that all that showed was that the UK Government and their agencies could not be trusted to sell a positive story about Scotland. I thought that that was incredibly immature and not remotely helpful, and suggested an unwillingness to engage seriously with the issues that we face.

Demographic challenges are acute throughout the UK. Unsurprisingly, I reject the notion that the answer lies in devolved immigration policy, especially when, as far as I am aware—I am sure that an SNP Member will correct me if I am wrong—it is still the SNP's position that the devolved immigration policy should be implemented and enforced by the Home Office through border control, presumably so that the SNP can blame UK Government agencies for any problems, as it does in every other context.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) mentioned some of the agencies that do not support the devolution of immigration policy. It is important to note that that is not because it is not technically or theoretically possible, but because it is not desirable, and not in the best interests of Scotland.

A number of organisations have stated clearly that Scotland's needs could and should be best met through a UK-wide system.

We need the future immigration system to be nimble and flexible enough to adapt to the changing requirements of our economy. The ridiculous "tens of thousands" target has never been met, and does not fit the requirements of the United Kingdom. No arbitrary targets, please: the right level of immigration for the UK is whatever number is needed at that particular point in time, in the areas where we need it.

We need a flexible immigration system that works for every part of the UK. In Scotland, that means recognising the needs of different sectors of the economy. Farming, fish processing, hospitality and social care all rely heavily on foreign labour, and will continue to do so. Business leaders have rightly voiced concerns about the immigration White Paper, and those concerns should be taken on board and reacted to. Changes must deliver for Scotland.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): There have been quite a few selective quotations, particularly in respect of the NFUS. Does the hon. Gentleman recall, from the immigration inquiry conducted by the Scottish Affairs Committee some time ago, evidence submitted by the NFUS, which said that it

"would prefer an all-UK system but would support alternatives if the Westminster Government is unable to develop the systems needed in time to prevent a hiatus in worker availability"?

I suggest that that hiatus is upon us.

Paul Masterton: I thought that ours was a very good inquiry. That is why I said that I did not believe that the devolution of immigration policy was not possible. It is perfectly possible, but I do not believe that it is in Scotland's best interests, and that is what the NFUS was saying. It said that the best way forward for Scottish industry and the Scottish economy was to retain it in a UK-wide network. We have the opportunity here and now, post Brexit, to create that network—a network that will work.

Post Brexit, we will be building our own immigration policy for the first time in more than 40 years. We need to use it as a chance to prove to the world that we are still an open, inclusive and welcoming nation. That is not always evident from debates here, and from things that certain people say on television. If people throughout the world want to come to our great country to build or rebuild their futures, is we should welcome, celebrate and be proud of that. It is a sign of our success as a nation, not something to be afraid of.

Immigration, ultimately, is not some problem that needs to be fixed. John Major said that there was nothing as Conservative as pulling your loved ones close and striking out to build a better future for your family, and he was absolutely right. As we build that new immigration system, let us ensure that those words, and that attitude, remain at the heart of our approach.

2.47 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I find it a tad ironic that the current Prime Minister is being hounded from office as much by the unrestrained xenophobia of the extremists in her party, as they chase some kind of British purity, as by her own incompetence.

[Deidre Brock]

I find it ironic because she herself was the author of part of the infrastructure of the institutionalised racism that underpins UK immigration policy.

I know that that is not a recent development. The shadow of empire is long and dark and pretty well documented. Those who watched the BBC programme on the Windrush on Monday night will have found themselves under no illusions about the racist threads that ran through government then, just as they do today. Enoch Powell was not a maverick shooting his mouth off; he was part of the mainstream, happy to strip other nations of skilled workers such as nurses when it suited, and equally happy to tell them to go home again when it looked as though there was political capital in it.

How things have changed, and have never changed. As has already been said, the Prime Minister's previous incarnation as Home Secretary was the time when that hostile environment was ramped up and the gimlet eye of suspicion fell on everyone: an immigrant, someone who might consider giving a job to an immigrant, a landlord who might consider offering a home to an immigrant family, a truck driver just crossing the channel, a charity offering support to asylum seekers, and anyone who might have come into contact with an immigrant or might consider coming into contact with such a person.

I thought that Gordon Brown's "British jobs for British workers" was bad, but the then Home Secretary obviously thought that she could go one better. Labour's anti-immigration mugs were topped by the Tories "go home" vans. It is a disgraceful and disgusting trail of mistrust and racism that led from Churchill and Powell through Blair and Brown to this shabby lot who are disgracing the concept of government. It stretches further back in time, of course, and Brexit is just one facet of it—this horrid and brutish British exceptionalism. But it is not only cocking a snook to the world; it is damaging to the people and economies of these islands. We are already seeing the effects of a Brexit whose full horror is still lurking around the corner and might be made worse by whatever ridiculous choice is being made for the next Prime Minister.

However, the effects of that ignorant and unthinking xenophobia bite deeper even than Brexit. We all have a roll-call of constituents unfairly treated by this Government and their policies. I have raised several, including people who have lived in the UK for decades but are now threatened. People who raised families while one of them worked are now being told that the stay-at-home parent has no right to stay. From the wife of a bodyguard to the Queen to the owners of a business employing over a dozen people, from the young couples hoping to get married and build a life to the folk who came as children when their parents answered a call for workers—all these in my constituency and many others are being threatened with the big stick of deportation.

I have already mentioned in previous debates and discussions the negative effects that the refusal of visitors for performance is having on Edinburgh's festivals. I know other cultural events up and down the UK are having similar problems, but my concern is with Edinburgh. Examples include illustrators of children's books being refused visas to speak at our book festival on the grounds that they might not go home to their families,

homes and occupations afterwards; orchestras having to fight to bring their musicians; and actors who have travelled half the world being suspected of intending to settle in the UK. It is nonsense. It is also incredibly damaging to the reputation of Edinburgh's festivals and to Scotland's name. It suggests that our nation is not a welcoming nation and is not a place that is open for business.

If the performers cannot get here, how many more visas are being refused to international travellers who would want to take in the festivals and explore a bit more of the country, spending money as they go? How much damage is being done to our tourism industry? Perhaps the Minister, if she is able to respond later, could give us some indications around those questions.

Along with the damage to the tourist industry of course goes damage to our food and drink exports. The reputation of the country as a whole is vital in selling our products in the global marketplace. It also matters for important sectors such as finance and the gaming industry, not least because their customers and colleagues move constantly across international borders. The more we drive people away on the basis of some spurious arguments, the more we will damage ourselves. We need international trade. We need international movement. We need our good international reputation.

There is another sector that gets really affected by travel difficulties: conferences. The contribution to Edinburgh's economy—and I imagine that of many other cities, including Glasgow—from hosting conferences is substantial. There is the money spent on the conferences themselves and the support for them, but there is also the money spent by delegates in the city's hotels, shops, restaurants and so on. We are talking about millions of pounds and thousands of jobs, but Alison Phipps, UNESCO chair in refugee integration, has said that she will stop hosting international conferences in the UK because of the Home Office's "inept," "embarrassing" and "discriminatory" visitor visa system which represents an effective travel ban for many academics.

An event in March, co-sponsored by the International Development Committee of this House, had most of its visas refused. We have universities that cannot get academics into the country, whose international students are being turned away and which are losing opportunities for international co-operation.

Far from being a world power, the UK is turning into a small and irrelevant backwater that will be shunned on the international stage because it refuses to be on the international stage. This damaging xenophobic attitude to immigration is not just a Brexit sideshow; it is a long-standing piece of arrogance and stupidity practised by successive UK Governments. It is an insult to people and businesses that try to operate internationally and is a sad little pastiche of a misremembered history being played out again and again as a farce by UK politicians who have no better idea.

2.54 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate. I want to pick up on—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) is scuttling away, but I am going to mention him in the next 30 seconds, so I ask him not to scuttle out too quickly. I would like to start, however, by praising the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth

and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) for the way he introduced this debate and the measured and reasoned arguments he put forward. I may not always agree with what he says but, as a colleague on the Home Affairs Committee, I think he always raises extremely valid points and puts them across in a sensible manner and I appreciate the way he did that today. That may not have won him much praise from his colleagues, but it was worth saying.

The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) mentioned how many people had contacted her over the immigration issue and many other matters. I remember that she even had to take to Twitter once because she could not do her shopping in Waitrose or M&S, I think, because of the volume of people who had been contacting her about the issue, but I gently say that at least some of the constituents she represents take a different view from her, so when their views are portrayed from this side of the Chamber I do not think they should be shouted down in the way they have been today by Members of the SNP.

Joanna Cherry: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but perhaps he would care to remember that 72% of people in Edinburgh South West voted to remain in the single market and the customs union. That is what informs the weight of emails I get about the importance of freedom of movement. I get hardly any—one in a blue moon—that oppose freedom of movement and hundreds in favour of it.

Douglas Ross: I am grateful for that intervention, but according to the hon. and learned Lady's own figures 28% of her constituents take a different view, and I think that should sometimes be heard in this Chamber, and of course we all remember that her constituents also voted to remain in the United Kingdom when we had the Scottish independence referendum in 2014.

I am grateful that the hon. Member for Dundee East did not leave the Chamber as I started speaking. He decided that Scottish Conservative Members did not have enough experience to speak in this debate—that we were too young, too silly, too short of experience to contribute to this debate. Then when I tried to intervene on him he was too feart to take the intervention. *[Interruption.]* And he is now too feart to even listen to this; he cannot even stay in the Chamber. Well, I have more to say about him: he was too feart to listen to Scottish Conservative Members then, and he is too feart now because he has walked out of the Chamber. Sometimes some people say that, with experience and longevity in this Chamber, you also become boring and irrelevant, and I have to say, having looked at the faces of the hon. Gentleman's colleagues as he was speaking, I think he has now reached that point in his career. That is perhaps why he has left—he has no love on those Benches and he has none from these Benches, given the despicable way that he spoke in the debate. *[Interruption.]* We are very excited today, aren't we? *[Interruption.]* SNP Members are asking where other Conservative Members are. The SNP parliamentary membership is 35, and I think we have less than a third of them here today for their own debate. For their own debate, they cannot even get more than a third of their Members to turn up. Perhaps the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West will get a few more back into the Chamber today.

We have also heard much in this debate from SNP Members about the “hostile environment” and we have heard lots of quotes from SNP Members about what the Conservative Government have done and what the Labour Government did. I am surprised, however, that not a single SNP Member has quoted their own party leader, because we all remember that Nicola Sturgeon said in July 2014, when she was Deputy First Minister and a key figure in the SNP independence campaign of that year:

“We have set down a robust and common sense position” on the issue of immigration and migration. She went on to say:

“If Scotland was outside Europe”

EU nationals would

“lose the right to stay here.”

That is a direct quote from Nicola Sturgeon from the SNP. That was their position as they were fighting for separation for Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom. I am glad we have a more measured response in the UK Home Office and the UK Government.

Stuart C. McDonald: The hon. Gentleman completely misrepresents the point the First Minister was making at that time. She is well known for being absolutely in favour of free movement, which would have been lost if Scotland was outside the European Union—which it would not have been, by the way. It is completely wrong to mischaracterise her as saying that people would not have been allowed to stay; she was simply stating, as a matter of fact, that free movement rights would have come to an end.

Douglas Ross: I am not sure I can do anything different than quote the First Minister's words back to the hon. Gentleman. Nicola Sturgeon said in July 2014:

“We have set down a robust and common sense position. If Scotland was outside Europe”—

which it would have been if it had separated from the rest of the United Kingdom,

“they”—

EU nationals—

“would lose the right to stay here.”

That is what the First Minister said, verbatim.

I am grateful that the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East, who led for the SNP, agrees with my next point. We have seen a number of comments in the press by someone who was at the time an SNP councillor and has now become one of its representatives in the European Parliament. I respect Christian Allard's right to have a personal opinion on whether to apply for settled status but he is also in elected office, and I am concerned that his comments encouraging people not to apply for settled status could lead people into a difficult situation.

On 12 February this year, the Home Affairs Committee held an evidence session on the settled status scheme, and I asked witnesses what advice they would give if professionals or politicians were encouraging people not to apply for settled status. Nicole Masri, the legal officer for Rights of Women, said:

“We would really be encouraging all professionals to relay the message that people have to apply for this scheme”.

Danny Mortimer, the chief executive of NHS Employers, said:

“Our advice is: the system is there; you have to apply.”

[*Douglas Ross*]

The hon. Gentleman said at the start of this debate that he would also be encouraging all his constituents to apply for settled status, and I hope that we will get that consistent message from politicians representing all parts of Scotland in all Parliaments. The advice that Christian Allard is proffering could be dangerous for people who might think it acceptable not to apply for settled status and then fall into significant problems.

I want briefly to mention an issue that I have raised on numerous occasions about non-EEA workers in our fishing industry. It is an issue that has been raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) for the SNP, by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for the Liberal Democrats and by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for the Democratic Unionist party. I raised this at Home Office questions just a couple of weeks ago, and I certainly will not be objecting to the Minister responding to this debate, in the hope that she can again focus on the point that I and many other hon. and right hon. Members have made. The Minister has cited the Migration Advisory Committee in this regard, although she did quote it directly. It has stated:

“There is no case for schemes for particular sectors within the immigration system other than for agriculture, which has some unique characteristics”.

I worked in agriculture before I was elected, so I have gone from green fields to green Benches, and I know exactly that there are unique characteristics within the agriculture sector. Representing Moray, a coastal community, I also know there are unique characteristics within the fishing industry, and I believe that we have to look again at allowing non-EEA workers to come into our fleet. I mentioned my constituent, Douglas Scott, when I held a Westminster Hall debate on this issue. Douglas is from Lossiemouth and his boat is now being tied up. He cannot run his business because he cannot get staff from outwith the EEA to work with him.

The Minister has previously said that part of the problem with the previous system was down to certain people being exploited. That is a problem, and we have to deal with the exploitation. We have to deal with the crew and the skippers who exploit staff, but we do not have to absolutely rule out a system that has worked in the past. It has had problems, but I believe we must tackle the problems rather than saying that the system as a whole cannot be allowed to continue.

I am considering your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker, on the amount of time we can speak. I appreciate the SNP's bringing forward this debate today. It is useful to discuss immigration in Scotland and across the United Kingdom. I welcome the publication by the UK Government of the immigration White Paper, and particularly the listening exercise—a year-long consultation to hear the views of communities, organisations and individuals across the country. I am extremely grateful to the Minister, the Home Secretary and the Department for listening to the significant concerns raised by Scottish Conservative MPs about the £30,000 threshold and I welcome the fact that this is now under review.

I also agree that we do not need a differentiated immigration system for Scotland. That point has been well made in this debate by my hon. Friends the Members

for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton). The point has been made not just in this Chamber but outwith the Chamber. A report published by the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford has stated that it is

“not clear that significant regional variation would lead to a better match between policy and regional economic needs”.

We have also heard from a number of organisations in Scotland. CBI Scotland has said:

“Let's get it right for the whole UK. The better the outcome we get, the less need for variation across the UK and the less companies need to worry about doubled up systems and extra red tape.”

The Food and Drink Federation Scotland has referred to:

“Significant variations in approach to integration and reception that may impact on”—

our members’—

“ability to attract workers or relocate them to the required locations whether in Scotland or the rest of the UK”.

The Scottish Chamber of Commerce has said that its

“network does not believe that the devolution of immigration powers to Scotland is necessary to achieve a business solution to migration targets”.

The National Farmers Union Scotland has said that its “preference is that Scotland's influence should lead to a UK-wide system that meets our needs”.

I agree with CBI Scotland, the Food and Drink Federation Scotland, the Scottish Chamber of Commerce and NFU Scotland that a separated policy for Scotland would not be good for Scotland's interests or our constituents' interests, and I am pleased that the Government are not going to go down that route. I welcome the White Paper that the Government have published, and I look forward to the listening exercise. I hope that the Minister has listened to some of the concerns that I have put forward today on behalf of my constituents in Moray.

3.5 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I want to concentrate on the issues that education—particularly further and higher education in Scotland—has experienced and could experience as a result of a hard Brexit. First, I would like to talk about the post-study work visa, especially in my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on photonics. Right across the central belt of Scotland, we have an extremely large amount of strength and expertise in photonics, but photonics and quantum technology are very sensitive to developments in the market. We are currently bringing our international students here, training them up and ensuring that they have the necessary intellectual capacity, but then sending them home to their own countries so that they can challenge or work against companies in our own constituencies. What we should be doing with these talented people is ensuring that they stay to contribute to our economies and that that intellectual property is not lost to our competitors and those who would seek to undermine those companies.

We know that international students are a huge benefit to our local economy, and they pay fees of up to £35,000 per annum. That is a massive amount of money for them, so coming here to do a course—particularly a longer course—as an international student is a huge financial investment. When it comes to their graduation,

however, what do we say to their parents? We say, “Well, actually, there’s no guarantee that you can come to the graduation ceremony and go home again. So although you have paid the best part of £100,000 for your child’s education, we’re not even going to allow you to come and join in the celebration of their graduation.” That is shameful.

Conservative Members have talked a lot about the £30,000 salary threshold, and there have been many strong words about that this afternoon, so I urge the Members who have raised concerns about the threshold to join us in voting against it. We know that £30,000 is no indication of the skills of a particular person or of a particular sector. When the White Paper was first published, I asked a series of written questions about what was meant by low, medium and high-skilled positions. I was told that high skills equated to degree level, that medium skills equated to college level or A-level, and that low skills would describe somebody whose highest qualification was at GCSE level, or in Scotland, National 5 level. That was how the Government were designating skills, but I know many people with degrees who do not command salaries of £30,000. We also know that salaries in Scotland are significantly lower than in the south-east of England. Once again, policies are being developed that are particular to one area of the UK and do not take into account the requirements of others.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The hon. Lady makes a strong case on income thresholds. Does she agree that the minimum income rule, which continues to divide families in a spouse visa situation, is equally disgraceful? Many people in my constituency earn nowhere near £18,600. It is yet another example of the hostile environment created by the Government.

Carol Monaghan: It is £18,600 if they do not have any children; if they do, it is even greater. If they have children, we put in extra barriers to ensure that those families cannot be together. It is utterly disgraceful.

Many people in research and academia will not come close to the salary threshold of £30,000, such as early career researchers, technicians and many of the EU nationals working in our universities. We should be rolling out the red carpet for such people and doing everything in our power to ensure that they stay, contribute to the success of our universities, and continue to contribute to our communities. Yet once again, we put barriers in place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) mentioned Professor Alison Phipps, the UNESCO chair at the University of Glasgow. I will say a little more about her. Many of the projects that she is involved in are funded by the Department for International Development. The UK Government are funding those international projects, yet the academics involved in them—partners across Asia, the middle east and Africa—are unable to come and be part of that collaboration.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I, too, pay tribute to Professor Phipps, who works so hard on these issues. I wish to put on the record another case—that of the head of international relations at the Islamic University of Gaza, Amani al-Maqadma, whose visa has been denied despite the fact that her project is fully

funded by Erasmus+. She wants to come here to contribute to the work of the university, and once again the refusal is self-defeating. It defeats the purpose of the grants that the Government are handing out. Perhaps the Minister will be able to look into that before the end of the day.

Carol Monaghan: It is, of course, a ludicrous situation, given that the UK Government are giving money to these projects. Flights are booked, sometimes costing thousands of pounds, in the hope that the visas will appear in time, and then we get refusals so flights have to be changed. People can no longer book fixed flights; they have to be flexible flights, which are many times more expensive. It is an utter waste of money.

Stuart C. McDonald: Does my hon. Friend agree that one huge problem that we now have, which we did not have in years gone by, is that there is no right of appeal against many such decisions? Everybody has to contact their MP, and we are consistently trying to raise cases here and in newspapers. That is the only way anyone can get justice. We need to get back the right of appeal against all these decisions.

Carol Monaghan: That would make a huge difference, because once the application has been refused it is dead, and there is very little that we can do with it. We can support subsequent ones, but not the one that has been refused.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith also mentioned academic conferences. That is a serious issue, because it is not just about the economic benefits of hosting academic conferences in cities across the UK; it is about saying that we are open for business, we are outward looking, we are ready to collaborate, and we want to have such relationships with experts from across the world. If we cannot have conferences because people cannot get visas to come to them, we utterly diminish our position.

We have recently been raising the issue of the European temporary leave to remain that has been suggested for after Brexit. It will be a visa, or some sort of certificate, for potential students that will allow them to study at our universities, and it will be for three years. Of course, in Scotland our university courses are four years. Let us imagine for a second that EU students end up being classed as international students and have to pay international fees. We could be talking about £50,000, £60,000 or £70,000 in fees over the course of their degree. Are we expecting them to pay that huge amount of money on a gamble that they might get the tier 4 visa to complete the fourth year of their course? That is insane. Let us be clear: it is discriminatory. It will affect Scottish universities, which have longer courses, far more than other universities.

I will quickly mention the tier 5 religious workers visa. I have been contacted by a constituent and by many priests across the diocese who say that they cannot get supply priests from Africa and India because there have been changes to the visa. I have written to the Minister about that, and she responded that they can get a tier 2 visa. I am sorry—it is too expensive, and the archdiocese of Glasgow can get only two of them. It does not work. The hostile environment is also targeting faith communities.

Patrick Grady: I have parishes in my constituency, such as that of the Immaculate Conception on Maryhill Road, experiencing exactly the same issue. Priests have been coming for years on tier 5 visas without any problems at all. It is a law of unintended consequences, because the ministerial guidance on the matter is not about Christian preachers. It is a very serious issue, and the Minister knows that there will be a debate in Westminster Hall next week specifically about it. I hope that she comes prepared to justify the policy.

Carol Monaghan: The Minister will also have to justify it to the archdiocese of Glasgow and other archdioceses across the UK, whose bishops have been contacting MPs on this very issue.

I will mention Windrush very briefly. A constituent of mine has been told that he can get a maximum of £5,000 compensation for everything he has gone through. He is more than £50,000 out of pocket. The hostile environment has wrecked his life.

Finally, I quickly want to mention Helen, who came to see me last week. She fled Eritrea and, in the process, was separated from her two children. With the help of the Red Cross, she located her children and applied for them to join her. Her son was granted a family reunion visa; her daughter, who is now 13, was refused. So one child is still living displaced in Ethiopia and one child is living in Glasgow. Where is the humanity? I appeal to the Minister, if she has an ounce of humanity, to look into this case. The hostile environment has absolutely devastated that family.

3.17 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I could fill the rest of the debate and more with the constituency cases I have seen in the past four years. Just under a third of my casework is due to the incompetence of the Home Office.

Most recently, I raised the case of a young man, Eryaar Popalzai, who claimed asylum in 2014. He last made further submissions in 2017 and is still awaiting a decision. The Minister promised me that she would look into the case and that it would be dealt with. I received a letter this morning that said:

"I am sorry that a decision has not been made on Mr Popalzai's further submissions. The Home Office is aware that Mr Popalzai is vulnerable and has raised safeguarding issues. The Home Office is actively working on his case. However, it is currently awaiting policy guidance on an unrelated matter prior to making a final decision on his case."

This young man is in tears every time he comes to my surgery. What answer can I give him? Because that is no kind of answer at all. It is just, "Wait and wait and wait." He has seen his friends move on with their lives and carry on with their education, and he is stuck. He is stuck on antidepressants and is getting counselling, but the Minister has no answer for that young man.

Many of the cases I see in my surgery are of extremely vulnerable families who are in tears. Today, one of my members of staff, Mhairi, tried to accompany one of my constituents, a woman who is heavily pregnant, and her husband to Brand Street, because her three-year-old had been called for interview. I do not know what kind of interview the Home Office expects to get from a three-year-old at Brand Street, but the family went. Their other girls were at school. They were extremely worried that they would not be able to leave Brand Street.

During the course of the interview, the father had a seizure and had to be taken in an ambulance, because he was so stressed out about the interview. I still do not know how he is doing or whether he will be okay. I ask the Minister to make a decision on this family. They have daughters who fled in fear of FGM, and they do not want to take their daughters back to face FGM. She should have some heart and deal with this case as a matter of urgency, because it is no less than the family deserve.

I see many cases that look relatively simple and are similar to cases that have been resolved quickly but that, for reasons best known to itself, the Home Office has determined to be complex. As soon as the cases are determined to be complex, they disappear down a black hole somewhere and are not seen for months and years. The Minister and her Department need to look at this and ensure that such excuses are not made for cases that are not complex.

The Home Office is riddled with mistakes and errors, and I regularly see issues with incorrect names and addresses. In a recent decision letter, the Home Office mistook the difference between a closing balance and an opening balance on a bank account in refusing somebody a visitor visa. It loses passports, degree certificates and paperwork endlessly, to the detriment of my constituents.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making some important points. I want to expand on her point about visitor visas, on which she seems to suffer the same sorts of issues as I do. A great many of my constituents are simply asking that, say, their octogenarian parents are able to visit them, but they are being denied that possibility. Even though promises and assurances have been given, they are being denied access to see their grandchildren.

Alison Thewliss: The hon. Gentleman is correct, and I see it regularly—week in, week out—in my surgeries.

People who have visited the UK on multiple occasions without incident and with no problems, and who are well able to afford the cost of supporting themselves when they come to visit—not that their family would not support them, anyway, because they are guests—are refused time and again. It is offensive, and people are hurt by this. They miss out on family visits and family occasions such as weddings and graduations. They miss out on so much family life that we all take for granted. If any of us wanted to go to any of their countries, we would be allowed to travel. That is the inherent racism of the Home Office and its policies.

Imran Hussain: The hon. Lady is making a powerful case, particularly on visitor visas and the Home Office's poor decision making. I dealt with a case in which there was a discrepancy of one penny between the P60 and other evidence, so the application was refused and the person could not attend an important family wedding. Again, that illustrates the hostile environment created by this Government through the back door.

Alison Thewliss: It does, and the hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. I see this day in and day out at my surgeries.

More recently, a case has been highlighted in the press—it very much seems that the press is the way to go for those with a complaint about the Home Office, and

if I were to do that the pages of all the Scottish newspapers would be full of my constituents—of a group of blind musicians who came over from Chennai as part of a British Council, Creative Scotland and Scottish Government-funded project. They were asked to come over from India as part of that project, and two of the musicians were refused entry. These two blind musicians were told that they did not have sufficient reason to go back to India after the trip. Their carers were allowed in, but these people with disabilities were not. Because their case was highlighted in the press, the decision magically and mysteriously changed, but it was too late because the event had passed.

The group are now £4,000 out of pocket for flights that had to be cancelled. Will the Minister compensate this group of musicians from Chennai who were not able to travel to take part in a British Government project? That is no less than they deserve. She has wasted taxpayers' money, and she has wasted these young people's opportunity by refusing them entry and then cynically changing the decision when the case appeared in the press.

I have good grounds to believe that the Government pay attention to the cases that appear in the press and change their decisions. The UK Government deemed a number of people in the highly skilled migrants group, because they needed small and legitimate changes to their tax returns, to be in some way of bad character and a threat to national security under paragraph 322(5) of the Home Office rules.

The cases that I have highlighted in the press, and the cases of constituents who were on "Channel 4 News" and in the newspapers, were decided a full six months quicker than those of constituents whose cases I could not put into the press due to sensitivity. I would like an explanation from the Minister of why very similar cases, with very similar circumstances, were differently decided because two of them were in the media and two of them were not. The UK Government's decision-making process on this is deeply disturbing.

The same goes for many other cases I have highlighted in the Scottish press. I have a lot of reason to be thankful to people in the Scottish media, at *The National* and at other publications in Scotland, because they have repeatedly highlighted the terrible decisions made by the Home Office.

I chair the new all-party parliamentary group on immigration detention, and trauma has been caused to my constituents by persistent and arbitrary detention. There seems to be a modern-day cat and mouse act, with people being arrested under immigration detention and then let go. The impact on those individuals is traumatic and appalling, and these are people who have been through a huge amount of trauma already. They have been tortured and trafficked. They have seen things that none of us would ever want to see, and they are being locked up with no time limit.

People can accept being in prison if they have done something wrong, and they know when their sentence will end, but people in this country, quite uniquely, are held in immigration detention with no end in sight. I ask the Minister to consider why she thinks that is fair. I pay tribute to the strength and dignity of those with experience of immigration detention who came to last night's launch of the all-party group to tell their stories. People in arbitrary detention do not know for how long

they will be locked up, even though they have done nothing wrong. That is a stain on this Government and previous Governments who endorsed places like Dungavel.

We need to do so much more to highlight the plight of people held in immigration detention. We must make sure that we do all we can for people who come to this country fleeing persecution and FGM and looking for a place of sanctuary. We must not, by this Government's actions, cause them further trauma and further pain. Instead, we must protect them and welcome them with open arms.

We are celebrating a refugee festival in Scotland this week. We are celebrating all the things that refugees and asylum seekers bring to this country, and the Government would do well to attend more such events to celebrate people, rather than locking them up, detaining them and causing them pain.

3.26 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): This has been an excellent debate so far, and I am sure the Prime Minister will come to regret—at least I hope she will—that her defining legacy, quite apart from the Brexit chaos we face, is the hostile environment she created through her Government's antagonistic, discriminatory and entirely counterproductive immigration policy.

In the Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016, we have seen an effort to prevent people from accessing basic services such as employment, healthcare and education. We have witnessed a Home Secretary become Prime Minister and knowingly take a cruel and entirely unnecessary approach towards immigration. If we listened to the Government, we would think the immigration process straightforward, but many people are unable simply to leave, as the Government might lead us to think. More often than not, the Government's policies have meant that the most vulnerable in society, often women, are disproportionately suffering.

One of my constituents in Paisley and Renfrewshire North, Ms A, is from Botswana, and she came to the UK 10 years ago as a student. She met her British partner, whom she married and they had one child together. Unfortunately, the relationship broke down due to abuse. Ms A is solely responsible for their five-year-old child, as the father shamefully provides no financial support, nor does he exercise any contact.

Ms A initiated the lengthy independent leave to remain—ILR—process to settle in the UK some time ago. However, with uncertainty looming and no official documentation granting ILR, Ms A's employer chose to end her contract of employment, plunging her into an extremely vulnerable position. She has no recourse to public funds, nor the funds to secure childcare provision that would enable her to re-enter employment. As a result and understandably, my constituent's mental health is deteriorating and she is anxious that any further delay in her application will plunge her even deeper into financial hardship, although she wonders whether that is indeed possible due to the hefty amounts of money she has spent at the Home Office already.

With Ms A's son due to start school in August, what should be a positive time for that one-parent family is mired in insecurity and dread as Ms A waits for a decision from the Home Office. Who will look after Ms A's son if she is sent home? I say home, but Ms A has

[Gavin Newlands]

been here for nearly a decade and naturally views Scotland as her home. What kind of future citizenry are we creating if we send the mother of a British citizen home? What will that five-year-old boy carry with him into the future?

The plight of Ms A is the plight of many refugees and asylum seekers throughout the country, and that has been further affected by the Government's policy move to end automatic settlement for refugees after five years, deliberately leaving asylum seekers uncertain about whether they will eventually be deported. My constituency office in Renfrew deals with many cases like that of Ms A, and it is difficult to see how the climate of insecurity can be maintained if Scotland wants to continue to attract people from overseas in an attempt to combat the ageing of our population.

Recently, the UK Government also imposed changes for tier 5 entry visas, including, notably, the removal of ministers of religion from the eligibility criteria. That decision has generated much concern from faith leaders throughout my constituency and in religious communities across the United Kingdom. If we take the example of Catholic communities, that change will have a significant impact on priests coming into the UK because most Catholic dioceses regularly use the tier 5 religious worker visa route for them to come here on supply placements while parish priests are away for short periods. The supply placements are imperative as they enable people to continue attending mass and receiving sacraments, while keeping parish activities running smoothly—activities that are of benefit to the entire community, not just to Catholics.

Under the new Home Office guidance, priests on supply placements will now be required to use the tier 2 minister of religion visa route, which will double the costs incurred by parishes and make supply cover effectively unaffordable in some of the poorer communities. Unfortunately, the tier 2 route also imposes strict language requirements, and even those priests who have completed seminary in English may now be required to sit an additional English language test before embarking on their placements. Religious leaders in my constituency are extremely worried, not only about the financial and practical implications, but about the human costs of those hostile policy changes. I will go into more detail on this issue in the Westminster Hall debate next week initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and touch on some of the representations that I have received from faith leaders across Renfrewshire, including from Bishop John Keenan.

I could go on about immigration detention policies, asylum seekers being denied the right to work, the denial of access to public funds and the ending of freedom of movement—which is one of the best intergovernmental policies ever drafted and something that my generation and the generation after have taken for granted because who in their right mind would want to end it? I could go on about Home Office incompetence, refugee family reunion rules, Windrush and sending LGBTQ people back to countries where homophobic persecution is rife.

The indifferent, iniquitous and incompetent Home Office's roll of dishonour is, like immigration detention, limitless. We have come to expect that from the

Conservatives, but the Labour party has been complicit in much of this, I am sorry to say. Of course, I am happy to acknowledge that there are many in the Labour party who speak out on those issues, and I admire the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), who now speaks for the Labour party on the subject, but its Front-Bench team has displayed a singular lack of leadership over several years. If, instead of producing "Controls on immigration" mugs, Labour had joined the SNP and others in talking up the real and tangible benefits of immigration, the Brexit vote might not have come to pass.

Remarkably, the Labour party has failed to stand up for freedom of movement, despite the enormous benefits it has brought to the UK. The shadow Foreign Secretary said on "Peston":

"We're not going to die in a ditch for the sake of freedom of movement".

What a short-sighted thing to say. When the new Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill was introduced, the Labour party intended to support the Government, but U-turned after facing enormous criticism. On Second Reading, the shadow Home Secretary said that

"the Labour party is clear that when Britain leaves the single market, freedom of movement ends. We set that out in our 2017 manifesto...so on that basis the Front Bench of the Labour party will not be opposing the Bill this evening."—[*Official Report*, 28 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 515.]

We all know that 90 minutes later, amid a growing backlash on social media, Labour shifted its position and announced that it would whip its MPs to vote against the Bill. That is not leadership; it is a political and moral vacuum at the top of the Labour party so concerned by UKIP, the Brexit party and Nigel Farage that it has allowed its policy to shift to the right along with the Tories.

The leader of the Labour party has repeatedly made the incorrect claim that freedom of movement is responsible for the undercutting of workers' rights. He wrote in *The Guardian*:

"If freedom of movement means the freedom to exploit cheap labour in a race to the bottom, it will never be accepted in any future relationship with Europe."

That is completely wrong and risks scapegoating migrants for weak labour regulation. The Labour party failed to show proper opposition to the toxic rhetoric on immigration coming from UKIP and the Tories, out of fear of being seen as weak on immigration. The Labour party should be ashamed of its infamous "Controls on immigration" mugs, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) referred earlier.

By contrast, we on the SNP Benches have spoken out regularly on these issues in this place. If we cannot, through argument or the voting Lobbies, change the UK approach, it is explicitly clear that Scotland requires its own distinct approach. The mid-year population estimates published on 25 April highlight the scale of the challenge. Scotland's population continues to increase, and is at a record high of 5.4 million; however, population growth has slowed over the past two years. The Scottish population is ageing: in 2018, some 19% of the population were aged 65 and over, compared with 16% just 10 years ago. Fourteen of Scotland's council areas—mostly rural or island councils, as well as areas in the west—have experienced depopulation.

Migration is the only reason Scotland's population continues to grow. Over the year to mid-2018, some 20,000 more people came to Scotland than left. The recent decrease in net migration has been driven by fewer people moving to Scotland from overseas and more people moving overseas, out of Scotland. I am not entirely surprised by that, given the immigration rhetoric over the past couple of years and the Brexit decision. Natural change—births minus deaths—did not contribute to population growth: over the same one-year period, there were 7,000 more deaths than births in Scotland.

We want the Scottish Parliament to have the powers to establish a less restrictive immigration policy. It is increasingly clear that the UK Government's immigration policy does not address our economic, demographic or social needs. There is cross-party support for the reintroduction of a proper post-study work visa that suits Scotland's needs. It is time for a tailored migration system for Scotland, and the Scottish Government's discussion paper shows how such a system could operate.

This is not merely politicking, or just a desire to be seen to do the right thing; it is an absolute necessity for Scotland, its people and its economy. As per usual, and as we expect, the Conservatives are blind to Scotland and its needs. I cannot quite manage it, but I really should be grateful, because by both their words and their actions more people in Scotland now realise that the only way Scotland will have policies in place to suit Scottish needs, whether on immigration or any other issue, is through independence. That day cannot come quickly enough.

3.37 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a real pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). As he said towards the end of his speech, there really could be no more appropriate topic than immigration for the SNP to choose for our first Opposition day debate for nearly a year. The inept and damaging approach of this Conservative Government to immigration typifies how this Westminster Parliament is incapable of serving Scotland's needs.

As the current Prime Minister's reign fizzles out in the midst of a constitutional crisis, she is frantically clinging to the wreckage in an effort to outstay Gordon Brown's reign, staying till the last possible minute as she desperately searches for something other than the Brexit shambles to be her legacy. She should not fear: help is at hand from the SNP. As my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North said, one policy that can undoubtedly be laid firmly at the door of the current Prime Minister is the hostile environment and the ludicrous net migration targets on which she has insisted throughout her time as Home Secretary and Prime Minister, despite the fact that they have never been met.

It is not a legacy of which the Prime Minister can be proud. When she stood on the doorstep of No. 10 at the outset of her premiership, she promised to fight against the burning injustices in our society. Not only has she failed to do that; instead she will be remembered as the architect and driving force behind a policy that has not only failed but created a whole new set of burning injustices, typified by the scandalous treatment of the members of the Windrush generation.

As a member of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, I was involved in a case study of two of the Windrush cases in some detail. We were able to see the way in which those acting on behalf of the Home Office repeatedly ignored extensive documentary evidence that these people had every right to be here. They detained them and were on the verge of deporting them from this country. Given that treatment and the denied-my-vote scandal that took place on 23 May, it is perfectly understandable that EU nationals living in the United Kingdom are afraid about the protection of their rights after we leave the European Union should they find themselves in a position similar to that of the Windrush citizens—where they have every right to be here but do not have the right paperwork. In that respect, I pay great tribute to the work of the 3 million group and also of the New Europeans, who have done a lot in relation to the denied-my-vote scandal.

The Windrush scandal illustrated with a human face the severe unintended consequences of the hostile environment policies. Perhaps even worse, they were not unintended at all, and it was the price that the Prime Minister felt was worth paying to achieve her unobtainable targets. There is no doubt about it, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) said, that there is a racist element to these policies. The long-term lawful residents of the United Kingdom who lost their jobs, their homes and their health as a result of the Windrush scandal were black and ethnic minority people. The only known middle-aged, middle class white person to have lost their job as a result of the Windrush scandal is the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), who had to resign as Home Secretary, but make no mistake about it, the rap for the Windrush disaster rests at the door of the outgoing Prime Minister.

Carol Monaghan: My hon. and learned Friend mentions the outgoing Prime Minister. When I first wrote to her about my constituent who was caught up in the Windrush scandal, she was in fact the Home Secretary. She knew what was happening years before it was brought to the attention of the House by the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy)—I think. She knew about it years before, yet denied knowledge when it all blew up.

Joanna Cherry: The Prime Minister left others to take the rap for her. It is important that today's debate notes that the hostile environment is the legacy of the outgoing Prime Minister. Of late, there has been a rush in certain Tory quarters to disown the policy. Much as they like to try to lay the whole Brexit fiasco at the door of the current Prime Minister, such chameleon-like figures as the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) and Ruth Davidson—both populists who have more in common than either would care to admit—have tried to distance themselves from the hostile environment without ever taking a principled stand against it.

The current Home Secretary likes to talk about how hard his father worked after arriving in the United Kingdom from Pakistan with just £1 in his pocket. In Scotland, we have a very significant community of Asian Scots, many of whose parents came to the United Kingdom with just £1 in their pocket like the Home Secretary's father. The reality is that the current policies of the Government, of whom the Home Secretary is

[Joanna Cherry]

part, are designed to discourage people from following in their footsteps. Even worse, as we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) and others this afternoon, the visit visa system is designed to prevent the families of our Asian brothers and sisters and others from visiting, except in all but the most exceptional circumstances.

At the start of this debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) made a forensic speech. In a measured way, as we would expect from him, he went through in forensic detail the various problems with the system. In particular, he dissected the White Paper and outlined what is wrong with it—what is wrong with replacing freedom of movement with an expansion of the already failing tier 2 visa system. He also pointed to the demographic time bomb for Scotland, which appears to be conveniently ignored by Members on the Government Benches. He also pointed out that the Scottish Government have proposed constructive alternatives to the White Paper.

The shadow Minister, who knows I am very fond of him, suggested that a differential system would be an impossibility for Scotland but, as I said to him in my intervention, there are many examples across the world of differentiated systems working effectively. Canada is the example of which I am most aware, having been there to study the system, but there are other examples. I gently suggest that the Labour party has a go at looking at those examples. If it wants to get back any of the votes it has lost in Scotland, it needs to get on board—this might be a bit of a tall order—with the understanding that the position in Scotland is different.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who has had to leave his place, made a very powerful point about the threatened mass eviction of asylum seekers in Glasgow by Serco, and he has an Adjournment debate on the subject tomorrow. This is another spin-off from the hostile environment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith, who is my constituency neighbour, spoke about the impact of visa refusals on the Edinburgh festivals and on conferences in Edinburgh, as the capital city of Scotland is so important to our economy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) made a powerful contribution about the impact of the Government's immigration policies on education and skills development in Scotland. She is an expert in the field of photonics, about which she spoke, but the points she makes apply across the science, technology, engineering and maths sector and into other sectors such as language teaching. We are discouraging early career researchers and technicians from working in Scotland by expanding the tier 2 system.

Other Members, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), spoke about the problem with religious visas. I first became aware of this problem in relation to the Thai temple in my constituency, but the issue is clearly affecting all sorts of religious denominations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) said that she could have filled the rest of the debate with constituency cases and indicated that

they account for a very high percentage of her workload. She is right, of course; that is the position of most of us. That is why I was so puzzled by the speech of the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). Given that so many Scottish MPs have a high caseload of immigration cases, I am surprised that he is not in a similar situation. Stirling must be a little spot that the Government's hostile environment has not reached.

What I really want to say to the Scottish Tories is that there is no doubt that, in this respect, SNP Members speak for their constituents. We speak for the high number of immigration cases we have to deal with, but we also speak for the fact that most of our constituents voted to remain in the European Union, and opinion polls show that even more people want to remain in the European Union than did three years ago.

I have to say that I feel a little bit sorry for the Minister as she has to both lead and sum up the debate today. It seems a bit unfair, particularly on her birthday; you'd think they would give her a wee bit of a break, especially as I am not aware of any shortage of Ministers in the Home Office. The Minister seemed keen to point to the evidence of the Migration Advisory Committee. Later, we heard from the hon. Member for Stirling that he is pretty unhappy with the MAC report, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East indicated in his forensic dissection of it.

Of course, the MAC report is not the only source of evidence on which the Minister could draw. She could also look to the report of the Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population, which estimates the damage that ending free movement will inflict on Scotland. The group comprises a panel of experts with real expertise in the effects of migration and population on the economy and demography of Scotland, who said that proposals in the White Paper

"are projected to reduce net migration to Scotland by between 30% and 50% over the coming two decades",

despite the fact that that migration is essential to growing the Scottish economy and to keeping our population up at the level that it is required to be. There are a number of other interesting things in the report by the Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population and I commend the Minister to read it. It would be incorrect to leave the Chamber with any impression that business in Scotland is completely happy with what is proposed in the White Paper.

Deidre Brock: Members from the Scottish branch of the Tories have bandied about a lot of quotes about business. I wonder whether my hon. and learned Friend is aware that the Scottish policy chairman of the Federation of Small Businesses has said:

"The UK Government's obstinate approach to immigration is a clear threat to many of Scotland's businesses and local communities. These proposals will make it nigh impossible for the vast majority of Scottish firms to access any non-UK labour and the skills they need to grow and sustain their operations."

Is she surprised by that quote?

Joanna Cherry: Certainly not, because his colleague, the chair of the FSB, Mr Mike Cherry—no relation to me, in case there are any conspiracy theories from Conservative Members—said:

"The MAC's report is deeply concerning for the small business community."

Dr Tim Bradshaw, chief executive of the Russell Group of universities, has said of the Migration Advisory Committee's report:

"This was a real opportunity to steer the UK towards a more modern and intelligent immigration system, but the recommendations are unimaginative and, we believe, unworkable."

The president of National Farmers Union Scotland said that the MAC had failed to take account of his organisation's evidence. He said that the NFUS was very disappointed that the Committee had "not heeded" its "strong evidence" in its recommendations. The NFUS has raised concerns about trade, access to labour and support for agriculture.

Of course, the concerns about the MAC are not just confined to the business and university communities. They have also been expressed by the unions, particularly by the Scottish TUC. Public opinion is also with those of us who bring this issue to the House today. A recent opinion poll in *The Herald* carried out by ICM said that 62% of people in Scotland support a different immigration solution for Scotland.

I understand the general thrust of the speeches by Scottish Conservative and Unionist Members. There were only a handful of them—

Stephen Kerr: Quality, not quantity.

Joanna Cherry: Well, that is debatable. The point that they are making is, I suppose, in keeping with their unionism—that they would like to see a UK-wide solution.

The hon. Member for Stirling indicated that he had many problems with the Migration Advisory Committee's report, but basically says that he wants a UK-wide solution. However, there does not seem to be much sign of a UK-wide solution that will resolve the concerns that have been expressed by the Scottish Conservatives, by business, by the universities, by the trade unions, and by the public in Scotland. I put this question to the Scottish Conservatives: if there is not going to be a UK-wide solution, would they support a Scotland-specific solution?

Douglas Ross: The hon. and learned Lady says, "This is the Scottish Conservative position", but does she accept that it is also the position of CBI Scotland, Scotland Food and Drink and NFU Scotland? They are not Scottish Conservatives. We are articulating the views of these very substantial organisations.

Joanna Cherry: No, I do not accept that, because many in business have said that they are prepared to look at Scotland-specific solutions. The Scottish Government are doing a lot of work with business on selected policy areas and directed solutions. My very good friend the Minister, and MSP for Edinburgh Northern and Leith, Ben Macpherson, is working on that with business in Scotland at the moment.

I put the question back to the Scottish Conservatives: if there is not a UK-wide solution that helps Scotland, are they willing to take the hit on Scotland's population and economy, or will they, like their leader, Ruth Davidson, simply make speeches about how they have quibbles with UK Government immigration policy, but never actually do anything about it? I suspect that most of us know the answer to that question.

Patrick Grady: My hon. and learned Friend is right. At least Scottish Conservatives have had the courage of their convictions to come here and speak. It is worth noting that, with the exception of a brief intervention, not a single Member from the Scottish Labour party has had the courage of their convictions to come here. Perhaps they have something more important to do than take part in a debate led by the Scottish National party, but it is a pretty poor show.

Joanna Cherry: It is worth remembering that, when the hostile environment policy was brought to the House by the coalition Government, most of the Liberal Democrats, from whom we have not heard a speech today, supported it, and only a handful of Labour Members had the courage of their convictions to oppose it—the shadow Home Secretary is pointing at herself; I know she is one of them, and I commend her for that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North said, the question remains: what is Labour's position on immigration? Where are they now on freedom of movement?

Patrick Grady: Where are they today?

Joanna Cherry: Indeed; there are not many of them here. They disowned freedom of movement in their 2017 manifesto. They were planning to vote with the Government on the immigration Bill but, after a fuss on social media, they retreated. I do not know whether they are putting up anyone to sum up the debate. They ought to, on such an important subject. I would like to know where Labour stands. We got a bit of a hint—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. This is an SNP Opposition day debate, so the Labour Front Bench would not be required or expected—indeed, including by the SNP—to put up a spokesperson.

Joanna Cherry: I stand corrected, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I apologise for any confusion caused, but it is still worthy of note that we have had so little contribution from Labour Members today. I am left with a puzzled question in my mind as to what Labour's position on immigration is, but it is a bit similar to the puzzled question in my mind as to what Labour's position on Brexit is. I suspect that the two confusions are linked.

One prominent Labour politician of yesteryear from whom we heard yesterday was Gordon Brown, who served an even shorter day in office than the current Prime Minister. He was wheeled out again to tell us that the Union of the United Kingdom is at risk; I am tempted to make a comment about Sherlock Holmes, but I will refrain. Where Gordon Brown and I could agree is that the Union of England and Scotland is at risk, but not for the reasons that he outlined, which seemed to blame the Scottish National party.

The Union of England and Scotland is at risk because this Parliament repeatedly ignores the voices of Scotland's voters and the representatives they democratically elect. The Union is at risk because, unlike the European Union, it is not a union of equals where the voice of every nation is heard and respected. It is a union where the largest member dominates and constantly imposes upon Scotland policies that are damaging to Scotland's economy, culture and society. In a series of speeches from my hon. Friends this afternoon, we have heard just how those policies are damaging Scotland's economy,

[Joanna Cherry]

culture and society. Those immigration policies, aided and abetted by the Labour party and Liberal Democrats, are not only a failure across the UK but a perfect example of this Parliament's failure to address Scotland-specific solutions on reserved matters.

Our nationalism in the SNP is simply a desire to right that wrong by self-determination. We do not blame foreigners or immigrants for the things that are wrong in our society. We welcome the rich contribution that they make to our country. We know that Scotland's future lies as part of a Europe of free trade and free movement of people. All the evidence shows that the Scottish economy benefits from immigration. It is time for immigration policy to be made in Scotland, so that the Scottish Parliament can ensure that migration works to the benefit of the Scottish economy, to stimulate population growth and to enrich our society and our culture.

3.58 pm

Caroline Nokes: With the leave of the House, I will wind up the debate, as well as having opened it for the Government.

We have had an important debate that has highlighted the scale of activity that the borders, immigration and citizenship system undertakes and the challenges it faces. It has been wide ranging, with Members raising policy issues and individual cases. For every case that Members have rightly raised, there are thousands more people who are satisfied with their experience of the immigration system. I am proud of the hard work and dedication of officials in the Home Office. It is wrong—wholly wrong—to try to characterise those who work for the Home Office, in some instances doing incredibly difficult and stressful jobs, as in any way uncaring or inhumane.

I have listened carefully to Members' contributions, and I welcome the thoughts and views put forward in today's debate. I will highlight some of the comments that I thought were particularly insightful and useful.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) made an impassioned speech about immigration being a reserved matter, and he and I of course believe that it should stay that way. He made some interesting points about the way we describe skilled and unskilled labour within the immigration system, and as part of the White Paper process and the future system, I think we have to find better ways to articulate that. It is not easy to describe skills only in terms of qualifications or salary levels, and I have certainly been guided by the engagement we have done during the last few months. In particular, those in the social care industry certainly have many skills that perhaps do not fall neatly into the immigration categories. I have spent much time over the last six months listening to the Scottish farmer, the Cumbrian hotelier and the Bristolian tech entrepreneur, and I absolutely recognise that we need to be adaptive. Our economy is changing, and jobs exist today that did not exist five years ago. In the same way, there will be jobs in five years' time that we have not even dreamed of today.

The hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) spoke at quite some length and used the word "arbitrary" repeatedly, but it is absolutely not the case that we have an arbitrary system. We work very hard to make sure

that the decisions we make are the right ones, and there is indeed a great deal of work still to be done to make sure that we improve.

Imran Hussain: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Nokes: No, I am sorry, but I will not give way. The hon. Gentleman was not here at the start, and I have a lot of ground to cover in just a little time.

Last summer, I very much enjoyed going to Dundee and hosting a roundtable with people working particularly in the tech sector and the gaming industry. It is important that we reflect on the issues and views not just in a range of different sectors across industry, but of course in the different parts of the United Kingdom—both the individual countries of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and the different regions.

My superb, I have to say, Scottish hon. Friends may not have the length of service of the hon. Member for Dundee East, but I do not think we should in any way see length of service as a proxy for skill. They have certainly shown not only that they have grasped the issues but that they can carry their voice to Government and talk sense in a constructive and persuasive manner. This week, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has extended the MAC's commission to looking again at salary thresholds. I commend all those who made the point that we should do that. Indeed, some of them appear to have missed the fact that we are doing it.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) made, to be quite frank, some outrageous allegations. She has called me "shabby" and accused the Government of being "racist". I reject her very simple and, to be quite frank, nasty attitude on these points. I have spent the last 17 months making sure that we talk about immigration in a thoughtful and humane way, and I have to say that I have gone to quite some lengths to reach out across the House and listen to different views. I do not think that she either listened to or understood my opening comments, when I talked about the record high number of visitor visas granted—2.3 million last year, up 9%—

Imran Hussain: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Nokes: I am sorry, but I have made it clear to the hon. Gentleman that I have a lot of ground to cover, and he was not here for the bulk of the debate.

The grant rate of visitor visas is in the region of 88%, and the characterisation of the UK by the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith is one I simply do not recognise. It was a description that, to be frank, perfectly encapsulated her party's doom and gloom personality: never has a glass of whisky been more half-empty.

My hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) had some very interesting quotes not only from the First Minister of Scotland, but from one of the SNP's recently elected MEPs. The concerns he raised suggesting it was in any way appropriate—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Some hon. Members have not been in for the debate, and I do hope they are not going to disrupt the Minister when she is trying to reply to those who have been in for the debate.

Caroline Nokes: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Indeed, the noisy hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) has come in chewing gum right at the end, having left very soon after the beginning.

My hon. Friend the Member for Moray raised the concern that people would be encouraged not to take part in the EU settled status scheme. The scheme is working well, with over 800,000 people through so far, and I do think it is important, as the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) emphasised, that people go through the process and get their status.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) might not have heard the announcement made earlier this week on the MAC's commission with respect to salary thresholds, because she emphasised that point a great deal, but I reiterate to her that the visit visas are granted at a rate of about 88%, of which 97% are processed within 15 working days. When it comes to customer service and speed of service, I am the first to say that we can always do more, but the characterisation of the process as slow and inaccurate is very unfair.

The hon. Lady also raised an important point, which I would like to respond to, on students and European temporary leave to remain, particularly the consideration of Scottish universities, which have four-year degree programmes, and indeed the many universities up and down the UK that hold longer courses for medicine, veterinary science or architecture. This is something that we are looking at closely. While I am unable to provide further details at this stage, we are considering how best we can ensure that those students are not disadvantaged. That point has been put to me during the different stages of consideration of the immigration Bill, and I have no doubt that this is something that we really must resolve.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) spoke of immigration detention and described it as arbitrary. It is not arbitrary: at any one time, 95% of people with no leave to be here are in the community, and two thirds of those who go into detention leave within a month and over 90% within four months. There is a pilot scheme in Newcastle for women who would otherwise be detained in Yarl's Wood, in which they are being supported in the community. The hon. Lady will of course know that this Government commissioned Shaw to do a re-review of detention; we are implementing his recommendations. I remind her that the detention estate is 40% smaller than it was when this Government came to office. That is progress, and the direction of travel is good.

I cannot comment on the individual circumstances of the case that the hon. Lady raised, but I would like to emphasise that the Government have been clear: female genital mutilation is a crime; it is child abuse, and has absolutely no place in our society. However, we must consider each case on its own merits.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) spoke of the issue of religious workers. There is a debate on that subject next week, and I encourage Members to attend it. He also mentioned freedom of movement. I gently remind him of the need both to reflect upon and uphold the outcome of referendums. He might not like it, but freedom of movement played a part in the referendum of 2016.

The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) referred to the Adjournment debate that we will hold tomorrow on the subject of those individuals in Glasgow to whom Serco is providing notice to quit their property. It is of course important to reflect on how we address the challenge of people who have no leave to be here and whose appeal rights are exhausted, but who still stay in accommodation that they have no right to be in. I reassure Members that there will be an opportunity to debate that tomorrow.

The hon. and learned Lady suggested that I had been abandoned on my birthday to both open and close the debate. I want to reassure her that there is nothing I love more than being at this Dispatch Box. I also reassure her that when it comes to taking evidence and listening to opinion, of course we listen to the Migration Advisory Committee, the Government's independent experts, but over the past year we have also been listening to the CBI, both in Scotland and in England. We have been listening to the Federation of Small Businesses, Universities UK, the Russell Group, MillionPlus, the Tourism Industry Council, the NFU in England and Wales, and indeed in Scotland, and many more individual businesses and employers, both large and small.

It is right that we take evidence. It is right that we listen to opinion. We are committed to improving the borders, immigration and citizenship system. That is why we will continue to listen to and consult Members from both sides of the House, as well as stakeholders across a broad range of sectors.

I thank Members for their insightful and thought-provoking contributions. I will continue to reflect on them in considering the Government's approach going forward, and I look forward to further debates on these points, and indeed others, over the coming weeks. I have no doubt that hon. and right hon. Members will continue to raise these issues with much passion and enthusiasm.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House regrets that the outgoing Prime Minister's legacy will be her hostile environment policy and her unrealistic and damaging net migration target; calls for a fundamental change in the Government's approach to immigration, refugee and asylum policy to one based on evidence, respect for human rights and fairness; welcomes the contribution made by migrants to the UK's economy, society and culture; rejects regressive Government proposals to extinguish European free movement rights and to require EU nationals in the UK to apply for settled and pre-settled status; and recognises that a migration policy that works for the whole of the UK will require different policy solutions for different parts of the UK, particularly given Scotland's demographic and economic profile.

Patrick Grady: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Just for the record—I know this is standard practice now—the House has basically resolved unanimously that the Prime Minister's legacy is the hostile environment, and called for the various reforms outlined in the SNP motion. Can you clarify for the House what we should expect from the Government in response to an Opposition day motion having been approved by the House in such a manner?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. As I suspect he knows—he hinted that he might—the former

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

Leader of the House made a statement on what could be expected. The Government will make a response within, I think, approximately two months. I hope that is clear.

Armed Forces Day

4.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Armed Forces Day.

It is a real honour to open this debate to celebrate Armed Forces Day. It is an opportunity for us to say thank you to those in uniform who serve this country. It is an opportunity for us to express our gratitude to those who are in the regular service, the reserves, the cadets and those who served in uniform, our brave veterans. Also part of the armed forces community are the mums, dads, children, girlfriends, partners, wives and husbands; those who are in the immediate surrounds of those who wear or wore the uniform. On behalf of a grateful nation, I hope the House will join me in saying, "Thank you. Today and this week is all about you."

This is the eleventh annual Armed Forces Day, and each year the event becomes bigger and bigger. I am pleased to say that the Defence Secretary will be going to Salisbury this weekend. That city is of course famous for its 123 metre spire, but it is also the home of 3rd Division. It is therefore quite apt for her and others to be celebrating our armed forces in Salisbury. The Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), the Procurement Minister, will be visiting Wales and the Minister for the Armed Forces, my right hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) will be visiting Scotland.

I had the real honour of visiting Lisburn at the weekend. As somebody who served there during the troubles, how inspiring it was to be able to stand there in the high street with the mayor and various dignitaries to watch the parade of our soldiers, sailors, air personnel and cadets. They were able to walk through the town and receive the gratitude not just of those in elected office, but of the thousands of people who lined the streets. Armed Forces Day is not just about parades, but the open day that takes place afterwards. I am very grateful to the people of Lisburn and indeed to the people of the rest of Northern Ireland. The year before, I was in Coleraine.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister was also in Bangor in North Down. I was alongside him—that is how I know.

Mr Ellwood: I have made so many visits to Northern Ireland, but they do not blur into one and the hon. Gentleman is right. The point I am trying to make is that when I and others served there, there was simply no chance of being able to walk down any high street in uniform and there was absolutely no chance of the civilian population being able to express their gratitude. The change is absolutely fantastic and very welcome.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I would like to give my right hon. Friend a vote of confidence, because I know he played a very big part in the D-day commemoration events in Normandy. I had the great honour of going on to the Boudicca and meeting the veterans. I would also like to thank the Defence Secretary and the staff, who were absolutely magnificent in organising that event. It was simply extraordinary and a total success. I just wanted to say that to the Minister directly, because we owe him great thanks for all that.

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful for those kind comments. I not only thank my hon. Friend for what he has done, but pay tribute to the sacrifice made by his father, who was part of the Normandy landings and who received the Victoria Cross—

Sir William Cash: The Military Cross.

Mr Ellwood: The Military Cross, I beg your pardon. He was killed on Hill 112 at the very beginning of that advance. I will come to what happened there and to the fact that I was on board the Boudicca with 90-year-olds who stayed up later than I did, drank far more than I did and were up earlier than I was the next day.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I join the Minister in paying tribute not only to current armed forces personnel, but to ex-servicemen. Will he add to the list of those he is congratulating and thanking the merchant seafarers, particularly at the Normandy landing? Many civilians took to their boats at very short notice to help to liberate Europe.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman has jumped ahead of me, but I absolutely am happy to pay tribute to the work of the merchant seafarers. They supply our surface fleet and submariner fleet and logistically keep them at sea. They played such a critical role in the Normandy landings and do so today as well, and he is right to point that out.

Today is Reserves Day—I declare that I am a reservist—and we should pay tribute to them. Hon. Members might be aware that many are wearing their uniform today with pride, and I point out in particular that many reservists are part of the Whitehall family. Yesterday at the Foreign Office, we invited all those civil servants who not only work hard for the Government and our country in their day jobs but wear the uniform as reservists. They are in all three services, and it was wonderful to see the variety of support not just from the organisers who put this together to show that there are those who can do both jobs, but the other employers that allow and give time to our service personnel so that they can be reservists, as well as working for them.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I cast my eye towards the side Gallery during Prime Minister's questions to see our hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) wearing his uniform—the uniform of the Royal Artillery—and, as the Minister mentioned, I look forward to welcoming the Minister for the Armed Forces to our Stirling military show on Saturday. I think that it would be a really good thing if our serving personnel and our reservists have more opportunities to wear their uniforms in public. The more that the public see those who wear the uniform and have the opportunity to thank them in person, the more the bond will be strengthened between the public and those who serve them so selflessly in the Queen's uniform.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. If any of us travel to the United States for business or otherwise, we will see—in any airport or high street—that if there is somebody in uniform, others will go up and simply thank them for their service. Those people are completely unknown to them but simply do that out of a sense of duty and pride. Perhaps we are a bit reserved in this country, but we should do that more, particularly with veterans. I am really pleased

that one thing I have managed to do is enlarge the veterans badge. It was so small that someone had to invade that person's body space to realise that it said "Veteran". It is now twice the size, so it really jumps out at people. I hope that that will be the green light so that if anybody sees that badge, they go up to that person and say, "Thank you for what you have done for our country."

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Will the Minister also thank the many veterans charities around the UK who help and support veterans to adjust to civilian life? I am thinking particularly of the Coming Home Centre in Govan, which I regularly support with letters to ensure that they get adequate funding. Will he say something about that and encourage MPs to get involved in helping veterans charities to get the funding that they need and deserve so that they can help veterans?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to heap praise on our veterans charities. There are around 400 service-facing charities of different sizes. Some of the large ones that we know well, such as Combat Stress and Blesma, have been around for 100 years or so; others, which aim to keep the name of a loved one alive, are just starting up. They do incredible work, and it is so important that we honour and respect that, but we must also make sure that their work is co-ordinated, because resources are limited, and it is important that charities work together in synergy to ensure that we provide the best possible service for those who require it.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister makes an important point about the need for proper integration and co-ordination of the charities supporting our veterans. I join in his remarks about Reserves Day. Having served in the reserves for 12 years, I think it is important to acknowledge the sacrifices made by reservists. Thousands of them have served on operations overseas. We should recognise the impact that may have had on their personal life, and they should not be forgotten when it comes to supporting veterans.

Mr Ellwood: Sometimes reservists step forward to fill the gap when there is a shortfall in the regular components of a unit or formation. I know from when I served—I am looking around at others who have served—that after a number of days, no one can tell the difference between reservists and regulars; that is how good these people are. With the character of conflict and conventional warfare changing, we need the skillsets and specialisms found on civilian street. That is another reason why reservists make an important and growing contribution to our frontline capabilities, so I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

There are three objectives for Armed Forces Day. The first is to do with showcasing what the armed forces do. We need to recognise that the profile of our armed forces has changed. Iraq and Afghanistan are no longer in the headlines all the time. However, that does not take away from the fact that we are involved in more than 20 operations and exercises around the world. At any moment, about 4,000 members of our Royal Navy are at sea or working overseas; 7,000 members of our RAF are working overseas; and 10,000 members of our Army are deployed on operations or exercises. That is a major commitment. It is us looking beyond our shores,

[Mr Ellwood]

helping other countries and making our mark across the world. Those operations cover the full spectrum of capability, whether they involve the interdiction of drugs in the Caribbean, countering piracy, dealing with a resurgent Russia in the skies of eastern Europe, still mopping up extremism in Iraq or Afghanistan, or helping upstream with the stabilisation challenges in African countries, together with our Commonwealth friends.

Let us not forget what happens closer to home. When we are required to support civilians here in dealing with flooding, or in Operation Temperer, when the police require extra support to deal with terrorist attacks, it is our armed forces who stand in harm's way. It is because of our armed forces that we can sleep at night, knowing that our country and its interests are absolutely defended. What we try to do, through Armed Forces Day, is explain that. That is important because the footprint—the outreach—of our armed forces is shrinking. All those in our age group probably know of somebody who served—perhaps our parents, and definitely our grandparents. Our bond with them is a reminder of what they did for our country. We are aware of the duty they performed, and perhaps of their sacrifice. I am horrified to say it, but we could get our entire armed forces into Wembley stadium. That is how small our armed forces have shrunk, so civilians' direct exposure to our armed forces is ever smaller. It is critical that on Armed Forces Day, we celebrate, show and educate the public on exactly what our armed forces do.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): Like many colleagues across the House, I went out to speak to constituents who had come to talk to us about the “Time is Now” lobby. Will my right hon. Friend also explain what the armed forces are doing about the climate change challenge?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend has raised an important point. I shall deal with the threats that we face in a minute, but she is right to point out that a campaign to do with climate change is taking place outside the building at this moment. I believe that, in the long term, climate change is the biggest threat that we all face but need to face up to. If we are to be the custodians of values and standards, that must include looking after our planet, in which regard Britain can take a leading role.

The second point that I wish to stress is that Armed Forces Day is all about civilian society saying thank you to our armed forces. It gives civilians an opportunity to say, “We are really grateful for what you are doing.” That does not just mean us, perhaps through speeches in the Chamber; it does not just mean the town mayor taking the salute as the parades walk by; it does not mean just the crowds showing their appreciation by clapping and saying, “Thank you very much indeed.” It also means our being able to say, “Thank you for keeping us safe,” and ensuring that we do so regularly.

This is a one-day event when we say thank you, but a thank you should be said on every single day of the year, and the importance of that should be reflected in the armed forces covenant. We highlight the event and it has a profile, but we have that duty every day—not just the Ministry of Defence, but every Whitehall Department. That is why it is so critical that the Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board, which brings together

the responsibilities of other Departments, can point the finger and say, “The NHS: is it providing the necessary services? Local government: is it providing the necessary housing, or are we disadvantaging the people whom we promised we would look after?”

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant, I am delighted that we are having this debate. The Minister has touched on the impact of other Departments and Veterans Gateway, and how they should be working together. Does he agree that there is a significant problem with the Home Office in respect of serving personnel and their families, especially Commonwealth soldiers who need visas?

Mr Ellwood: Not for the first time, I find myself in agreement with the hon. Lady. We have had Westminster Hall debates on this issue, and we have made the case for the Home Office to reconsider. There has been a communications problem, in that those who are making the trip have not been made aware of the consequences of bringing family members. We are correcting that, but no one should be hindered from doing what is best, given the contribution that our Commonwealth friends make to our armed forces. We shall have to see where things move in the next couple of months and what the appetite will be, but I am absolutely behind the hon. Lady in wanting this matter to be addressed.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): My right hon. Friend was explaining what Armed Forces Day does to acknowledge the efforts of our current armed forces. Does he agree that it is also a time to remember those who lost their lives while pursuing their military careers? Just this week, there has been a fantastic community effort. A memorial at Califer Hill in Moray had become overgrown, as a result of issues that I do not want to go into. So disappointed were currently serving and previous members of the military that the memorial to three Tornado operatives—Samuel Bailey, Hywel Poole and Adam Sanders—had become overgrown that members of the community got together to tidy it up. That is a great thing that they do, not just on Armed Forces Day but all year round.

Mr Ellwood: I am really pleased to learn that the memorial is being given the reverence and support that it needs, and is being cleaned up so that people can actually see it. I try to distinguish between this day and Remembrance Day, because Remembrance Day is about thanking and reflecting on the fallen. I want Armed Forces Day to be a celebration and an outreach, educating people about the positive aspects of our armed forces.

The armed forces covenant falls, almost, into three parts. It asks organisations to support our regular personnel, and there have been nearly 4,000 signatories. We have seen companies give deals and special discounts to those in the regular forces. The covenant also covers the reserves; it asks companies to make sure that if someone signs up to be a reservist, they get time off to go and do their annual camp and training and so forth, and they are not impeded or have to use their holiday time. I stress that anybody who allows their employees to go away for a number of days finds that those employees will come back all the richer from their learning and what they have experienced, to the benefit of the employer.

Ruth Smeeth: Does the Minister agree that we as employers in this House—every single Member of Parliament—should become covenant employers in our own right and that the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority should work with us to deliver that? We should not have to go through the MOD to deliver that; we should all be encouraging everybody to promote the covenant both in this place and in our constituencies.

Mr Ellwood: Let us go further than that: shall I write to IPSA and invite it to become a signatory to the covenant? Perhaps that is what should happen.

Ruth Smeeth: That would be a wonderful intervention by the Minister, but I have tried to make that suggestion in private to IPSA and have not been very successful, so any help the Minister can give me to ensure that IPSA allows us all to become covenant employers would be very welcome.

Mr Ellwood: I suspect that following this debate IPSA will be more aware that there is an invitation heading its way.

Another organisation that I hope is well aware that there is an invitation on the way, because I have written to it, is the BBC. I make the following point directly—although the BBC will probably cut this because our debate is being broadcast by BBC Parliament. Our veterans—2.5 million of them—are changing in profile. Sadly, in the next 10 years that number will diminish and go down to 1.5 million, because we will lose the second world war generation. The television is so important to many of these elderly people, who are on their own and use it for company and so forth; we have heard all the debate about this. I simply ask the BBC to look carefully at this issue. Its contribution to the covenant could be to allow our veterans to continue having that free TV licence. I have written to the BBC but have yet to have a reply; I look forward to receiving something in the post very soon indeed.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): There has been consensus thus far in this debate, but I must point out that one way of achieving that would be to bring it in-house; let the Government of the day decide. The provision was in our manifesto and we are willing to introduce it, and it was in the right hon. Gentleman's party manifesto as well. Let us keep those TV licences free for the over-75s.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman makes his point and it is now on the record—unless the BBC has cut that bit as well.

I need to stress the issue of perception, because another aspect of Armed Forces Day is to correct the perception that somehow if someone joins our armed forces they might be damaged by their service. Nothing could be further from the truth: those who serve are less likely to go to prison, less likely to want to take their own life and less likely to be affected by mental health issues. If anyone is affected by any of those issues, then absolutely the help should be there, and we spoke about the importance of veterans support and indeed what comes from the Government too. The idea that those who serve are damaged is perpetuated in society; the Lord Ashcroft report underlined that, and we need to change it. We need to change it for two reasons. First, it

does nothing to help recruitment and the next generation wanting to sign up for our armed forces. Secondly, it does nothing for those who have left the armed forces and are seeking a job, as they might therefore not get that job. They might not gain employment because their employer has a false idea that somehow they are damaged. We need to change that.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Although I agree with much of what the Minister is saying about employers, we must also recognise that neither a reservist nor a full member of the armed forces is an employee. The Minister has implied on the Floor of the House that he does not agree that members of the armed forces should be treated as employees. Does he think that it would help with recruitment if he said that they should be?

Mr Ellwood: I think the hon. Gentleman is being pedantic; I think he knows exactly the spirit in which I support the armed forces. If he wants to discuss this after the debate I will be more than happy to do so, and I will listen carefully to his speech if he wants to elaborate on that. My commitment to all those who serve and their ability to get into employment is second to none, as I hope is reflected in the comments I have made.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I absolutely echo the support of everyone in this Chamber for the current members of our armed forces and for our veterans. Most of the veterans I see in my surgery are suffering for one reason: their mental health as a result of post-traumatic stress disorder. We live in a rural area, and they need quite specialist treatment. Even with the best will in the world, and with the covenant, they are not able to access that support. Will the Minister make a commitment today that any member of the armed forces who is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder will be able to access defence mental health services at whatever time after they have left service, because PTSD often crops up more than six months after they have left?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady highlights the challenge that we face. While someone is serving in uniform, their mental health and physical health are the responsibility of the MOD, but once they depart from the armed forces—or, indeed, if they are part of the family in the armed forces but not wearing a uniform—that is the responsibility of the NHS. The NHS has good facilities in some areas, but they are less good in others. They are getting far better: the TIL service—the trauma intervention and liaison service—is the first port of call for anybody with the challenges that the hon. Lady mentions. We also have complex treatment centres up and down the country, but they are still in their infancy and we need to get better from them. I absolutely hear what she says, and this is exactly why we have the Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board to point the finger and say, “Please look, this is the support that we require.” The NHS has just received £21 billion extra. Let us see some of that money go into creating parity between mental and physical health.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend makes an extremely important point about looking after our veterans and their mental and physical health, but he must not allow himself to be diverted from the

[James Gray]

important point he was making, which is that we have 200,000 extremely fit and active members of our armed services, very few of whom are suffering in those ways. The point of Armed Forces Day is to celebrate the fantastic service that they make to our nation. Of course we must look after those who are disabled in one way or another, but we must none the less celebrate those who are fit, healthy and active, and serving the Queen.

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend does in supporting the armed forces' profile in Parliament. It is absolutely paramount in educating others. He is absolutely right to say that we need to keep this in perspective and celebrate the positive side of being in the armed forces, while not forgetting our responsibility and duty to look after those who are less fortunate or require support.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I apologise to the Minister for coming in late. The covenant has now been going for about 10 years. What percentage of its objectives have been realised in areas such as mental health, housing and employment? It has been going for a very long time and I would like to know how far we have come. Has he had any discussions with the British Legion about this?

Mr Ellwood: That is mapped out in our annual report, and, if I may, I will send the hon. Gentleman a copy of it. He is absolutely right to suggest that we should not be complacent about the importance of setting the bar ever higher. This is one of the toughest things that I have found in getting parity across the country, not least because responsibility for this is devolved to the other nations.

I can finally get to my third point on what the armed forces are actually about: the bond of the communities themselves. I am looking round the Chamber, and I can see representatives of the places where people have served. There is a symbiotic relationship between the garrison, the base or the port and the surrounding conurbation. Let us take Portsmouth, Aldershot and Plymouth as examples. Those places have a long history of relationships between those in the garrison and those who are working outside. Spouses and partners will seek work in those places, and children will need to be educated there. It is absolutely paramount to get all those things right, and we must ensure that we celebrate that as well. Armed Forces Day can highlight and illuminate the bond between organisations, and it is important for us to focus on that.

That brings me to the issue of veterans, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash)—who has now departed—raised earlier. Madam Deputy Speaker, I know that you want me to conclude soon, but it is worth focusing on this issue for a minute or so, if I may. We owe a duty of care to our veterans. I was on board the Boudicca for that incredible journey, taking people who did so much 75 years ago at the turning point in the war. It was humbling to be with those soldiers, who landed in the biggest maritime invasion that has ever taken place, with 150,000 people on those five beaches: Omaha, Utah, Gold, Sword and Juno. I discovered that Juno was originally going to be named after jellyfish. Ours were all named after fish—goldfish, swordfish and

so forth—but Churchill was not going to have a beach landing, at which people would die, called “Jelly”, so it was changed.

I spoke to some of those veterans. I asked one in particular, “What’s it like coming here?” He said, “It reminds me of when Britain was great.” That sent a bit of a shock through me about where we are today and the role that we have taken. Perhaps we have become a little risk averse in what we do, and in our willingness to step forward as a force for good. We should reflect on that.

The veterans strategy, which I touched on earlier, is critical in bringing together and co-ordinating charities and the work that we do, to ensure that support is there. Part of that is ensuring that there is a transition process, and that when people leave the armed forces they transition back into civilian society with ease. Of those who participate in the official transition process, which can last up to two years, 95% are either in work or employment within six months, which is very good to see.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I represent Darlington, which is the nearest major town to Catterick garrison. I see what the Minister is talking about day in and day out. Does he think that we do enough to celebrate, and to highlight to people who might be considering a career in the armed forces, the support that is available to people leaving, and the breadth of successful careers that veterans enter into, from teaching to running their own businesses? All kinds of things are possible, and sometimes we do not explain and highlight enough the support that is available to people as they leave.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady is right to point out the challenges for somebody who has perhaps done three tours of Afghanistan on the general-purpose machine gun. How do they put that in their CV and then sell it to, say, a civilian organisation? There is not a lot of call for that, unless they are some soldier of fortune who is looking for mercenary work, which I hope would not be the case.

We need to ensure that this can be turned around, and the skillsets can be recognised. That must happen in two phases. First, we must explain to companies what the skillsets are, and our Defence Relationship Management organisation does exactly that. Secondly, we must ensure that the individual who is in uniform and who is departing can learn the necessary skills and gain civilian qualifications on their way out, so that they can land in civilian street best armed to face the future.

James Gray: Will the Minister pay tribute to some very good companies? FDM springs to mind, which has so far placed 500 personnel in the IT industry, and does great work. To pick up on one detail, when people leave the armed forces they tick a form that gives them the option of a variety of interests and industries in which they might like to be retrained. For some reason, there is no box for the land-based industries: farming, game keeping and so forth. Will he change the form to allow soldiers to opt for land-based careers, for which, after all, they are well qualified?

Mr Ellwood: I was not aware of that. I would be delighted to have a meeting with my hon. Friend. Perhaps we can take the matter forward and see what we can do. Absolutely, we should not miss any such opportunity.

While we celebrate the armed forces we must look to the future and ask why we have our armed forces. They do not just defend our shores and promote prosperity; perhaps for Britain more than any other country, they project global influence. It is in our DNA to participate and be active on the international stage, to move forward, and to have an understanding of the world around us and to help to shape it. We will lose that ability if our hard power cannot keep up with the changing character of conflict.

As I see it, we are facing greater danger than at any time since the cold war. However, in the cold war, we had three divisions in Germany alone. We had 1 (British) Corps; now we are down to one warfighting division just in the UK. We are pleased to have an aircraft carrier, with a second on the way, but the fact that the Navy's budget did not change has affected the rest of the surface fleet. We are pleased to have the F-35 and the P-8 maritime patrol aircraft, which are excellent, but in the Gulf war we had 36 fast jet squadrons—today we are down to six. Our main battle tank has not been updated for 20 years, and our Warrior has not been updated for 25 years.

The money needs to come. We need to invest more in our defence if we are to keep that profile, but the threats are changing and becoming more diverse. There is not just a single threat—not just a resurgent Russia or a rising China—and extremism has not disappeared, but cyberspace will take over as the area of most conflict. Data, not terrain, will be the prize, and we will become all the more vulnerable as 5G and the internet of things take over.

We are becoming ever-reliant on an automated world, but how vulnerable we become, and how our world closes down, if that world is interfered with in any way. Two thirds of our universities are hacked or attacked in any year, so we need to build resilience. A hundred years ago we developed the RAF, which moved away from the other armed forces—we created a new service. I pose the question of whether we now need a fourth service, one to do with cyber and our capability to lead the world's understanding of not just resilience, offensive and defensive, but of the rules of engagement, too.

Somebody could attack this House of Commons, and we would not know who it was. We would not understand where the threat came from, but it would affect us. Even if we found out who it was, to whom do we go to complain? Who sets the rules of what is a responsible response? How do we retaliate?

These are questions that we should be asking ourselves, and we should work with our allies to defend western values.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Ellwood: I will conclude, if I may.

We constantly talk about the erosion of the rules-based order, but we do not say what we will do about it. China was not included in the Bretton Woods organisations that were created after the second world war. Somebody, some nation, who understands how the world is changing needs to step forward and articulate where we need to go. Otherwise, we will see a new cold war between the United States and China, and we will see these threats become greater and greater.

As we say thank you to those who have served and are serving, what are we doing about it? What role do we see ourselves playing? We have become distracted by Brexit in this vortex of discussing something that has taken our mind off what is happening around the world. The world is changing fast. I believe it is in our DNA to step forward, as we did 75 years ago, and help craft the world into a better place. That requires greater investment in our armed forces.

I conclude as I began, by saying thank you to all those who have served, all those who do serve and all those who want to serve, and the families around them. We owe you a debt of gratitude, and we are very grateful for your service.

4.47 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): It is a delight to speak in this debate. This Saturday people will come together in communities across the country to say thank you to the men and women who make up our armed forces community. Ever since the first national event in 2009, Armed Forces Day has become an important date in our towns, cities and villages. There are well over 300 events taking place this year in every corner of the UK, including parades, concerts, air displays and more.

In my own community in Llanelli, the local branch of the Royal British Legion and the Llanelli Veterans Association have organised a parade and a day of activities for adults and children, and I look forward to spending the day there. It is heartening to see the numbers of people attending events growing year after year and to see the whole community represented, from young children fascinated by the military equipment on display to the second world war veterans proudly wearing their medals.

There is a simple reason so many people turn out at events across the country: the public want to show their deep gratitude and admiration for our serving personnel, our veterans and their families—the men and women who stand ready at a moment's notice to do whatever is necessary to defend our country, and the personnel who represent the very best of Britain in freeing civilians from the tyranny of Daesh, assisting in the aftermath of humanitarian catastrophes, deterring Russian aggression in the Baltics and Poland, and contributing to peacekeeping operations across the world.

Our reservists play a vital role in each and every one of those operations, bringing their unique skills and experience to work with colleagues in the regulars. Today, on Reserves Day, we pay tribute to all those who give up their time to train for and serve in the reserve forces, many of whom will be wearing their uniform to work today to highlight the important role that they play.

Armed Forces Day is also a moment to say thank you to our veterans for their service and for guaranteeing so many of the freedoms that we take for granted today.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Armed Forces Day is a great opportunity for our communities to support our armed forces, and I will be very proud to attend the celebration in Tredegar this Sunday. I have been working with local employers in Blaenau Gwent to encourage firms to sign up as forces-friendly businesses and we have had a good response. However, my experience is that not enough businesses have heard of the armed

[Nick Smith]

forces covenant, so does my hon. Friend agree that we need an even bigger awareness campaign to help organisations to get involved and to support our veterans?

Nia Griffith: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is right. Considerable progress has been made on awareness, but we still need to make sure people understand what the qualifications mean and how the qualities and skills of our armed forces personnel can be translated into today's workplace. I understand from the Minister that he is very committed to work in that field.

In recent weeks, we have been reflecting on the particular sacrifice made by those who served in the second world war and, in particular, the D-day landings. It was a great privilege to attend the commemorations in Normandy earlier this month and to meet some of the men who took part in that operation 75 years ago. It is clear from talking to them that they do not regard themselves as heroes—they were just doing what they were trained to do and they got on with the job in the way that that war-time generation so often did. At Bayeux war cemetery we saw the immaculate flowerbeds by each headstone, carefully looked after by the staff and interns of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which does such important work in ensuring that the graves of those who made the ultimate sacrifice are treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve.

There will be significant agreement across the House today because we are all committed to our Armed Forces Day and to honouring the men and women of our armed forces community. Members of Parliament also have an important responsibility to talk up our armed forces and to highlight the many benefits of service, particularly to young people who may want to sign up.

I want to take this opportunity to ask the Government about several issues that matter to personnel, many of which were highlighted in the armed forces continuous attitude survey published last month. The first is pay. We know that subjecting armed forces personnel to the public sector pay cap has meant that they have received a real-terms pay cut for seven years running, which goes some way to explaining why satisfaction with pay is at just 35%. The pay award has again been delayed this year. The Armed Forces Pay Review Body has submitted its report to the Government, so I ask the Minister to update the House on the current pay round when he winds up the debate. I do not expect him to announce the pay award today, but can he tell personnel when they can expect to hear what the Government propose?

Giving personnel below-inflation rises also has a knock-on effect on retention. The number of personnel choosing to leave the forces is at historically high levels and pay remains one of the top reasons personnel decide to leave.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I have to ask the shadow Minister the same question I asked the Minister: if this is such an important issue, does she not agree that in terms of pay and conditions members of the armed forces should be allowed to be treated as employees and have a representative body to represent them with the Government?

Nia Griffith: Indeed. The hon. Gentleman makes a fine point and there is a very good case for having a consultation on what sort of voice would be practical for our armed forces—[*Interruption.*] If I may, I will make some progress.

The pay body's 2018 report highlights the extent to which personnel shortages put additional pressure on those who remain in the services. The latest personnel statistics show yet another drop in the trained size of the armed forces, with each of the services now smaller than at this point last year. Although we have seen a slight rise in intake in the 12 months to March—by 120 personnel—that alone is clearly not enough to enable the Government to meet the target set out in the 2015 SDSR. Will the Minister set out what specific action he will take to ensure that we do not continue to see further falls—[*Interruption.*] I do hope that the Minister heard that and will be able to tell us in his winding-up speech what specific action he or his colleagues will take to ensure that we do not continue to see further falls in the number of armed forces personnel.

The Minister will know the Labour party's view of Capita's recruitment contract, which is shared by many on the Government Back Benches. Given that the Government are not willing to terminate the contract, as we would like, what steps will he take to compel the company to meet its targets? Will he consider financial penalties if it does not comply?

Let me turn to housing for our personnel and their families. There have been persistent complaints about housing maintenance in service accommodation. Will the Minister tell the House what recent conversations he has had with Amey about this issue? Will he also update us on the future accommodation model? We all want to see good-quality service accommodation that meets the needs of our personnel and their families. We accept that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work for everybody. Some families will be in a position to buy, and the forces Help to Buy scheme may be able to assist them, while others are happy to live in service accommodation. Living on site with other military families can provide a crucial support network for our forces and their families.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): CarillionAmey has had more than 36,000 complaints in three years about the conditions of service family accommodation—that is 1,000 complaints every month. There is outrage among service families about the contract with CarillionAmey. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is time the Government stepped up and intervened so that we have decent maintenance for our armed forces personnel?

Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend makes a good point. None of us wants to see any of our serving forces and their families living in substandard accommodation. There are certainly issues to be addressed in respect of Amey and forces housing.

In respect of the future accommodation model, we do not want personnel to be pushed into the private rented sector without any choice. Indeed, a recent Army Families Federation survey demonstrated that, if the availability of the accommodation currently on offer was reduced and a rental allowance offered instead, only 22% of respondents would definitely remain in the Army. The insecurity, variable quality and limited availability

of the private rented sector is a concern, and it is not clear how the additional costs of private sector rents would be met.

The armed forces community encompasses not only current and former personnel but their families, who provide a crucial support network to service members and who experience the demands of forces life at first hand. The nature of service life means that many forces families have to move house repeatedly, including to postings abroad. One difficulty that some service families face is finding new schools for their children, especially if they resettle outside the admissions cycle.

A recent Children's Commissioner for England report highlights how service children are sometimes not placed in the most appropriate school with siblings or other forces children from the same unit, causing further and unnecessary distress. It can help if local authorities have better awareness of the needs of service children. For example, Rhondda Cynon Taf Council has a dedicated education officer who works closely with the families of serving personnel, and with schools, to ensure that the children of service members are supported in their education. The fragmentation of education in England, with admissions in the hands of academies or academy trusts, makes such work more difficult.

Ruth Smeeth: Does my hon. Friend agree that one issue that is really difficult for many schools to understand is the impact of Remembrance Day on children whose parents are serving? There might be only one or two children of service personnel in each school, and when children are taught about what may be happening in various areas of conflict, it means something slightly different to those whose parents could be out there. That is why education is so important, as is making sure that the covenant applies.

Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to make sure that children are properly supported and that a structure is in place within the local authority to ensure that schools are properly educated to understand that.

Obviously, we are very concerned about this fragmentation of education in England, with the academies and academy trusts being a bit of a law unto themselves. What consideration have the Government given to this issue, and what conversations has the Minister had with his colleagues in the Department for Education to try to assist with the admissions process in particular?

The families of Commonwealth personnel, who make an important contribution to our armed forces, experience particular challenges owing to the Government's minimum income requirements for bringing in spouses or children to this country. We on the Labour Benches believe in scrapping these income requirements so that all personnel are treated equally. I urge the Minister to prevail on colleagues in the Home Office to make that important change.

The nature of the work that our armed forces undertake—keeping us safe and representing us abroad—means that some people will not be in regular contact with service personnel if they do not have friends or relatives who serve. That is why Armed Forces Day is so important. It is an opportunity to say thank you, to show gratitude and appreciation and to commit to supporting our armed forces community the whole year round.

5.1 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith). I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate to celebrate our armed forces' past and present service to our nation on this the 11th Armed Forces Day.

We as a country have a proud history of stepping up on the world stage and it is our armed forces that ensure that we play a major role. This year, as we celebrated 75 years since the D-day landings, I have been learning about the incredible contribution that my constituency, Chichester, made. There are wonderfully vivid accounts of tanks rolling over the South Downs and of our still quaint villages being disturbed by our American allies playing baseball on the village cricket grounds. All along the south coast, there were practice landings before the assault was launched. There are tales of Eisenhower, Montgomery and Churchill watching a final rehearsal of the landings from the Bracklesham Bay Hotel as their men ran drills.

RAF Tangmere, near Chichester, played a huge part, taking operational control of 56 squadrons from 18 airfields and pilots from all around the world—from allied and occupied nations such as Canada, New Zealand and Poland. Our local history is full of incredible stories, although today there is little left of our wartime past. That is why I have been supporting the Save Tangmere Tower campaign, which is working to restore the former RAF control tower and to preserve a part of our military heritage, remembering not only the RAF pilots during the battle of Britain, but our brave Special Operations Executive agents, often women flying into occupied Europe.

Our wartime history has been woven into the fabric of our society. Even our generation have lived with the memories all around us. My grandmother served in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force and my grandfathers were in the Royal Navy and the Merchant Navy. My husband is named after his uncle who served and died with the Royal Artillery in Italy in 1944. We all grew up with a living history, and today very few who served are here to tell us the stories of our past. We often take the fact that we live in peace for granted. It is more important than ever to preserve the monuments that remain so that younger generations can understand how the sacrifice of others has enabled their freedom.

Today, Chichester still plays an important role in the defence of the realm, as Thorney Island is within my constituency. Thorney is home to the 12th Regiment Royal Artillery, which provides close support air defence to the UK's manoeuvre forces, protecting critical assets from a range of airborne threats. I have met some of the men and women serving at the base a couple of times and once totally by chance when we went to sell poppies at Westminster tube station and they were already there rattling their buckets.

My background is in business, so I must admit that I have a lot to learn about the armed services, but being in this place I have already begun on that journey and I am looking forward to continuing it, having signed up to the armed forces parliamentary scheme. With Portsmouth just down the road—and to follow in my grandfather's footsteps—I have enrolled in the naval course, where I will have the opportunity to get a real insight into what it means to be in the Navy by being in their shoes for a

[Gillian Keegan]

short while. This is becoming a theme in my office as one of my staff, Elena, is already a reservist and another, Tom, hopes to go off to Sandhurst soon to begin his officer training.

Our armed forces really are the pride of our nation. They place themselves in harm's way so that we may enjoy the liberties and freedoms that we all cherish and value, and today we are all here just to say thank you. In return, we must fully fund our defence capability and veterans' services, which is why I welcome the Chancellor's commitment earlier this year of £1 billion extra funding. I hope that we can continue to keep the memory of past service alive through sharing the stories of our ancestors and preserving the relics that remain here. The British armed forces are the envy of the world, and we and our allies rely on their professionalism and skill, both now and in the future, especially in such uncertain times as the ones in which we live.

5.5 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I will start by declaring an interest: as many Members here know, my husband served for 17 years in the Royal Navy, finally retiring as lieutenant commander in the Submarine Service. It is therefore appropriate that he joins us today in the Under-Gallery.

Armed Forces Day is an opportunity to thank members of our armed forces, both serving and retired, but of course this year there is added significance in that we are also celebrating 75 years since the D-day landings. Armed Forces Day is also an opportunity for us to do more than just speak and give more than just gratitude, and actually to take action to ensure that things are as good as we can make them for members of our armed forces, who are willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice. The contribution that serving and former personnel make to society goes beyond their service, and we should ensure that their futures—inside and outside the military—are worth investing in. We need to allow them to develop as professionals, both for their life in the armed forces and for their life beyond, to ensure that they can contribute to and develop links with local communities, and to make sure that their family life and personal wellbeing are assured.

It is important that we do not spend this afternoon being complacent. There is good work going on but, as a school report card would say, we could do better. There are issues that mean that serving is not always as fulfilling as it should be. The January 2019 statistics show that the number of armed forces personnel has continued to drop at an unsustainable rate and there are skills shortages in over 100 critical trades. We need to have breadth and depth of skills in order to tackle emerging challenges and threats, and that can be achieved only with a clear recruitment process and a good offering to new recruits. This means clear information on salaries and pensions, and an openness towards the talents of individuals. We must be flexible enough to ensure that those who may wish to take time out to progress in their civilian careers are able to do so. Career breaks have been introduced in many militaries outside the UK, and we should be looking at those examples where it is appropriate to do so.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): May I make a suggestion? As and when somebody from a given school in Scotland goes into the armed forces and makes a success of it, would it not be a good idea if they were encouraged in every way possible to go back to their old school and tell the fourth, fifth or sixth-year pupils how they did it—"I was in this very same classroom. You can do the same. It's a great career"?

Carol Monaghan: Of course, and people in many professions go back to their old schools and tell the students about their careers. We have seen the mess that has been made of recruitment—the amount of money that has been spent and the poor results—so maybe we should go back to using members of the armed forces as primary recruiters.

At all stages of the recruitment process, recruits should have confidence in its inclusivity of all identities of gender, sexual orientation, race and religion. When considering recruitment, it is important that we are also looking at the labour markets. Who are the military trying to recruit, where are their challenges, and who are they up against when trying to get the very best? If we need to consider the increased use of reservists to ensure that people have skills developed outside the military that can be used inside the military, then that should be done.

Armed forces pay scales reflect an outdated approach. Recruits will start with significantly lower salaries and more distorted pay scales than those in the police or fire services. In July 2018, the MOD announced that personnel will receive a 2% salary increase with an additional one-off payment of 0.9%. However, as the current inflation rate is about 2.2%, the armed forces' annual rise of just 2% is still below that.

Ruth Smeeth: Does the hon. Lady agree that it is even worse for those in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, who were not entitled to a pay rise at all, which is why they are currently consulting on an industrial dispute?

Carol Monaghan: It is incredible that we treat those personnel as separate when they are actually fundamental to the operations that we engage in.

Giving pay rises that are below the rate of inflation has a negative effect on the forces' reputation as an employer that nurtures and respects its employees. The Scottish Government have taken a progressive approach towards public sector pay, delivering a guaranteed 3% increase to all those earning below £36,500. We believe that, as a minimum, a similar offer should be made to all armed forces personnel.

Much has been made of the tax bands in Scotland with regard to military personnel. Will the Minister say what are the plans for mitigation for personnel in England who are earning less than £33,000 and are currently being taxed at a higher rate than their counterparts in Scotland? My hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) mentioned an independent representative body similar to a trade union that would help to ensure that the interests of personnel were addressed properly. It would be able to negotiate on pay and conditions, and to look at other structural issues, but unlike normal trade unions it would have no right to organise a strike. Clearly that would undermine the integrity of our armed forces, and

we could not allow that to happen. In many cases, a representative body works extremely well—for example, the Danish Reserve Forces Association, which describes itself as a negotiating organisation. It looks at contracts and pay but also provides legal assistance to personnel who need support in cases related to their service in the armed forces. This is something that we need to consider seriously.

Quality accommodation is fundamental to the welfare of personnel and their families. There are major issues with the MOD estate in terms of work space, living accommodation and training facilities, and a lot of it is in old, unsuitable buildings. The current management of the housing estate has provided extremely poor value for money for taxpayers. The performance of CarillionAmey in managing service accommodation has been shockingly poor. We do our personnel a gross disservice in continuing in this manner.

The education of forces children has been mentioned. There are big issues with continuity of education. It is right that we start considering military personnel children as having adverse childhood experiences, because their experiences potentially have an impact on their educational success. In Glasgow, when people fill in their annual update of contact details and other information, there is a tick-box that says, “Are the parents military personnel or veterans?” If the box is ticked, that is highlighted in the young person’s records and allows intervention if required. That is a very simple thing that could be done.

Veterans who have incurred physical injuries during their service should be assured that they will receive a commitment to lifelong specialist medical care. At the moment, these services are primarily led by charities, and we know of many such charities operating in our constituencies and throughout the UK. Stanford Hall was recently opened as a new facility for personnel who have suffered extensive injuries, such as limb loss. It takes over from Headley Court, which was the previous centre, but there is an issue with Stanford Hall: it is mainly for serving personnel, not veterans. It seems ludicrous that we cut people off at that point.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady makes an important point, and I spoke of the division between the two. I visited Stanford Hall. The NHS is building its own facility there, so it can share what is going on. The focus of Stanford Hall is on not only extreme injuries but all rehabilitation, no matter how small or large, and it is paid for by the MOD. The NHS is responsible for dealing with civilians, including our veterans, and it is important that we do not lose sight of that.

Carol Monaghan: I would like to make two points. First, a lot of the equipment in Stanford Hall has been funded by the charitable sector, and people gave money thinking that they were giving to charities for veterans.

Mr Ellwood: It will be shared.

Carol Monaghan: I hope it will. Secondly, it is important that veterans get rehabilitation along with other veterans and are not in separate or disparate places. It is important that they are all in one place—in a centre of excellence.

We have to consider the mental wellbeing of our armed forces. The UK Government have established a new 24/7 mental health helpline for service personnel and their families. A framework for combined working

has been developed between Combat Stress, which fulfils this programme, the MOD and the NHS regarding an out-of-hours mental health helpline, and we very much welcome that. While it is imperative to focus on primary care and support for physical and mental health, further effort must be put into the awareness and understanding of such conditions, so that both serving and former military personnel feel confident enough to reach out and ask for help when it is required.

There are 2.5 million veterans in the UK, and around 240,000 of them are living in Scotland, the majority of whom have re-established themselves in society.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): On that point, Scotland’s Bravest Manufacturing Company was officially opened last week by the First Minister. It is based at the Erskine Hospital site, which I am sure you are familiar with, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I have visited it a number of times. It is a Royal British Legion Industries social enterprise that gives veterans employment and development opportunities they might not otherwise have. Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming what it does for ex-service personnel and congratulating Michelle and the team on the excellent progress they have already made?

Carol Monaghan: For those who do not know about the excellent work that the Erskine Hospital does, it is known throughout the west of Scotland—in fact, probably throughout Scotland—as a real centre of excellence for veterans. I am a supporter of Erskine, as are many of my hon. Friends.

We know that a minority of veterans are affected by health issues related to their service. These are often early service leavers, who have only completed their training or had only a short period of service, and it is not right that, just because of that, we leave them to it. The support we offer them must be extended to ensure that they properly reintegrate into society.

War widows and widowers must also be incorporated into the veterans community, and must have services that are specific to their needs. We need to address concerns about the fact that a war widow’s pension is incorrectly perceived as a benefit, rather than compensation, because this has a negative impact when a widow is assessed for an income-based benefit.

I conclude by saying, on behalf of the SNP, that I extend the thanks of Members on these Benches to all those who are currently serving or have served, and to those who are supporting serving personnel. Often the families and the support networks are forgotten in our comments, so it is important that we remember them too on Armed Forces Day.

5.20 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), and I pay tribute to her husband. He did so many years of fitting service for our country, so I thank him also.

We have a fantastic legacy of military service in Ochil and South Perthshire. In fact, the predecessor constituency covering a large part of mine—Kinross and Western Perthshire—was the constituency of Alec Douglas-Home, who used to say it was a constituency of blackface sheep and Black Watch colonels, and I can say that the

[*Luke Graham*]

military legacy remains with us. Today, Ochil and South Perthshire combines Perth and Kinross with Clackmannanshire, and we have some very active veterans and some very active regulars in the armed forces, as well as a number of cadet forces.

The fantastic legacy still continues in south Perthshire with the Black Watch, while Clackmannanshire has the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and the air cadets—Squadrons 1743 in Creiff, 1145 in Kinross and 383 in Alloa—all of which do a fantastic job in training younger people and giving them new opportunities both to serve in our armed forces and to have confidence and skills that they can take on to civilian life. We are also very fortunate to have an Armed Forces Day that is commemorated annually in Clackmannanshire. Unfortunately, owing to inclement weather this year, it was rained off, so I look forward to joining the provost and all our local councillors to celebrate next year.

There are real benefits to our modern armed forces. The Royal Navy motto says:

“If you wish for peace, prepare for war.”

I could not agree more with that sentiment. I think many people in this House would agree that it is a sentiment that also stands true in politics. We must prepare for the worst situation, but in doing so we must make sure that we are strengthening ourselves and our allies to succeed and achieve the great goals that this country has always stood for—whether in democracy, justice or humanitarian aid. That is what our modern armed forces are here to deliver.

As well as that, the armed forces provide a number of opportunities for our citizens here at home. We see that in the cadet forces that take place in schools in my constituency—at Morrison’s Academy and other schools right across my constituency—and we can see how valuable the cadet forces are in giving younger people confidence and skills and in complementing some of the academic studies that are taking place every day. We are also very lucky—we can see these opportunities, and we know about them from speaking to teachers—in how the cadet forces can link with the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme. I hope that one day the National Citizen Service will be extended to Scotland because that has been an important part of citizenship right through the ages, and we should keep it going to show people the value of being a British citizen.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that when the National Citizen Service was first introduced, the Scottish Government did email and contact the UK Government about it, but never heard anything back?

Luke Graham: I did not, but after 12 years in government, the SNP could have done a lot better than just one email. I am sure the Minister will come to the Dispatch Box and make a fresh offer to the Scottish Government to join the National Citizen Service. I have actually gone into this, and the hon. Gentleman can check my parliamentary record, and there is money available if we were to join. At the moment, it is only Scottish—sorry, I should say SNP—stubbornness, not the UK Government’s, that is stopping Scotland benefiting.

As I was saying, our armed forces can be a fantastic humanitarian force, and as a member of the Public Accounts Committee before I became a Parliamentary

Private Secretary, I was fortunate enough to see the potential for that humanitarian force when visiting HMS Prince of Wales in Rosyth. There, I was able to see state-of-the-art technology and engineering—made and forged right across the United Kingdom, but brought together and based in Rosyth. That will provide this country with opportunities not to wage war, I hope, but to defend our allies and the international trade ways around the world and to provide humanitarian aid, as we saw recently when hurricanes hit the Caribbean and other areas.

Our armed forces are now less for war; they are for defence, but also for humanitarian aid. I agree with what my right hon. Friend the Minister said in introducing the debate, in that our armed forces need to be the most advanced in the world. They do not necessarily need to be the biggest. I lived in China for a number of years, and I saw that we are probably not going to match China on scale, but when it comes to the use of technology, tactics and skills and our deployment around the world, we can match virtually anyone. Working with allies across the world, large and small, we can deliver humanitarian aid, help to deliver defence and, where needs be, help to deliver justice, as this country did in some of the missions of the late 1990s, which were delivered so well.

I have seen the value of our armed forces, and I would like to come on to some of the responsibilities that I feel we in the House have. A few years ago, I was lucky enough to have the first round of Territorial Army training. Unfortunately, I was not able to complete it because my company shipped me abroad, but during that training I was able to see some of the conditions that our regulars have to live in.

A key area that I saw was housing, which has been mentioned by other hon. Members, and one issue, which still exists today, is housing around our defence estate. We have taken steps through our veterans strategy, but I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will be able to build on that and take further steps to improve housing on the defence estate and ensure that the men and women who are serving our country have the accommodation they deserve.

There is also the issue of mental health, both for serving and former members of the armed forces. The charities are fantastic, but we leave too much to them. In my constituency, one of our local councillors in Clackmannanshire, Councillor Bill Mason, works incredibly hard with SSAFA, providing welfare and support to a lot of veterans in Clackmannanshire and elsewhere in Scotland, but we should not be reliant on the charities. We should work in partnership, but make sure that they are getting the right support from our Government, too.

As has been mentioned by other Members from across the Floor, helping former armed forces personnel to reintegrate in civilian life is a real challenge and one that, even though we have an ambitious veterans strategy, we have not been able to address.

In my previous life, I worked as finance director for Tough Mudder. Tough Mudder worked with the Wounded Warrior project and Help for Heroes, so I had some first-hand experience. I remember that I had a captain who had served in Iraq put forward his CV to become a finance manager in my team. To be honest, once I had read through his CV and seen the work he had done and

the leadership skills he had, I thought the interview should be taking place the other way round, but it was difficult to align him to a job that had certain analytical and academic requirements.

Although by no means insurmountable, those requirements proved to be barriers that meant that that individual did not get that role. The Government need to look at those barriers and find the bridges so that we can help people who have been in the armed forces to hone their skills and use them to get the right qualifications. We also need to help them with their CVs and with interviewing in the correct manner so that they can show that they have the skills and experience and can apply them successfully in returning to civilian life and, we hope, in reaping the rewards of their experiences in our armed forces.

I touched briefly on the veterans strategy. If anyone has a chance to read it, they will see that it is a fantastic document, which has the co-operation of all the devolved Administrations, as well as local and central Government. I highlight to my right hon. Friend the Minister the fact that the strategy involves a mix of devolved and reserved services. In his introduction to the debate, he talked about the services provided by the NHS, which are devolved to different parts of the United Kingdom. I ask him to commit to policies being driven by central Government, considering that the armed forces and citizenship are reserved functions, to ensuring that this is driven from the centre and to working in partnership with all levels of government to make sure that support reaches and is felt in the individual communities around the UK, so whether someone is in Clackmannanshire or Bristol, they will get the same support, the same standard of care and the same valuable welcome back into civilian life.

I hope the Minister will recognise and use the new data that will be available from the latest census. The census Bill will be coming before Parliament. I know colleagues share my excitement with the Minister for the constitution that the new Bill will include a question on veterans in the census for the first time. I congratulate the British Legion on its “Count them in” campaign, which has been so successful. The inclusion of the question will give us data about veterans right across the United Kingdom and enable us to target services. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will be able to commit to use that data to further hone—we already spend £7 billion—the money we already spend on veterans services in the UK.

Days of recognition are important and valued, but our armed forces need us to fight for them every single day. The military has the motto, “Train hard, fight easy”. That is a motto we should adopt on their behalf here in this House.

5.31 pm

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is an honour and privilege to speak in this debate, and a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham). I find myself in the unenviable position of being the first member of the Defence Committee to speak today, but I see two colleagues in their place: the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) and the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois).

I have the greatest privilege to be the chair of the all-party group on the armed forces covenant and a vice-chair of the all-party group for the armed forces, with responsibility for the “senior service”, the Royal Navy, as I enjoy reminding the First Sea Lord on a regular basis. It is a privilege to be able to talk about how wonderful our armed forces are: those who currently serve and their families who support them day in, day out; and the veteran community and the people we call on to look after them. This is an opportunity that all of us should enjoy.

On Sunday, in my great city, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), there will be our Armed Forces Day parade. It is a wonderful event and I hope they stay in sunshine—not least because Saturday is my birthday. It will be a wonderful event, as it is every year, with hundreds and hundreds of children who will visit—

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): For your birthday!

Ruth Smeeth: I am being heckled by my hon. Friend. It is indeed my own birthday party.

What is so wonderful about our Armed Forces Day parade is the intergenerational conversations that happen, with our service personnel, our veterans community and our cadets—sea, air and Army—talking to each other and telling stories. This is what is so important. They are a community and a family, and we need to respect them at every opportunity.

Locally, we are privileged to have our own veterans community, the Tri Services and Veterans Support Centre, which is based in Newcastle-under-Lyme but serves all of North Staffordshire. It is run by Geoff Harriman, who does a huge amount of work for our veterans. It has been established for only three years, but five D-day veterans visit every week for a cup of coffee or tea and a biscuit, and tell their stories. Given recent anniversaries, I feel it is incredibly important that I name them so that they are on the record: Bert Turner, Harry Gould, Jim Wildes, Daniel Harrison and Norman Lewis.

I would like to tell the House the story of Bert Turner. Bert was in Bomber Command and was shot down twice during world war two. He is a D-day veteran. He delivered Paras—I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) is in his place—on to the field during D-day. His stories are extraordinary and they are all true. Day in, day out he flew sorties to ensure that we were safe. He gave up his time, even when he was shot down and could probably have taken slightly longer to recover. He got back in a plane to keep fighting with his comrades. He is an inspiration to all of us. He was also one of the people who went to Normandy for the D-day commemorations, and we thank the Royal British Legion and everybody who arranged his transport. His story and others have to inspire the next generation. That is why twice a year with the local cadets in Stoke-on-Trent—I am proud to be their honorary president—we arrange “Vets and Cadets”; we have pie and peas for our veterans and cadets, so that the war stories continue.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I am grateful to my fellow Defence Committee member for giving way. On behalf of the whole House, I wish the hon. Lady a happy 29th birthday, seasonally adjusted. I absolutely commend the initiative that she mentioned.

[Mr Mark Francois]

I want to mention another D-day veteran—Reginald Francois, my father—and I am immensely proud of that. She is right that we owe all these men a debt. My father taught me never to take living in a free country for granted. That is why I think “Vets and Cadets” is wonderful, because those who served can teach those who follow them the importance of freedom, and the fact that freedom is not free.

Ruth Smeeth: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention and, more importantly, I thank his father for his service.

Not only have we had the opportunity to celebrate our D-day veterans, but next year we as a country will be able to enjoy VE-day. This gives the whole country the opportunity to thank everybody who served then, who serves and who will serve, as well as their families and everybody involved. It annoys many of us that we focus on our veterans’ community only on Remembrance weekend and that we are able to ignore them for the rest of the year. We should not. They need our support day in, day out, because let us be honest: they earned it. Many of us in this Chamber believe that we act in public service every day, but the hours that we are away from our families and that we commit to our constituents are nothing compared with what we ask our armed services to do for us in every corner of the planet, without hesitation. If they dare to say, “No,” they are no longer in the armed forces. We thank them and their families, which is why I am adamant that this House should become a covenant employer, as should every Department. They should not just be covered by the Government saying, “But the Government signed up to the covenant.” Every employer in this country should turn that into a reality.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): One of the challenges we have with the covenant and Government Departments is to see in a practical way the well meant and written covenant pledges. An issue being raised with me relates to the Treasury, and the MOD has had to help those serving in Scottish parts with changes to taxation through the Scottish legal system to make sure that they are not disadvantaged by location. Another issue that has appeared is stamp duty tax. For a short time, serving personnel have the ownership of two homes and the Treasury models are not working to support them. Again, that challenge is for the family as much as for the serving personnel. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Treasury perhaps needs to focus a little more closely on its covenant commitment?

Ruth Smeeth: I could not agree with the hon. Lady more, as I do on most, if not all, issues. One thing that we miss with those who are currently serving is the burden that is placed on their families, who have to deal with not only the tax burden and costs associated with moving up and down the country but whether they have the right qualifications—if a teacher is suddenly deployed to Lossiemouth, for example, they might not be able to teach. If a member of our serving personnel gets a traffic ticket, their family has to sort it out if they have been deployed. The responsibility for all the small, day-to-day things of living fall on the families who are left behind, male or female, which is why we need to make the covenant real.

My concern about the covenant is that so many people say that they support it but do not know what it means. My wonderful city became a signatory to the covenant five years ago, but none of the people who signed it still holds the post that they held then. Unfortunately, my city has decided that its version of supporting the covenant is resending an RBL email once a quarter. That is not delivering the covenant—yet there are many places that do even worse. We have to make the covenant real. We need an ombudsman—I know that the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) supports that—and we need to ensure that the covenant means something to everybody.

Among those who do not understand what the covenant is are those who would be its beneficiaries. They do not know how or when to access help, and do not come to us and ask for it. One of the issues in this House is that too many of our teams do not know how much support is out there for serving personnel. That is why the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed and I organised an event in this place two weeks ago, so that our staff could meet people from veterans charities to learn how to get support for our constituents who are veterans when they need it. There are two questions that all of us should ask our constituents when they come to us for help: “Have you ever served in the armed forces?” and “Are you a member of a trade union or trade body?”. We can help them in a way that no one else can if we know those two pieces of information. We have to make sure that they can get the right support, from places as diverse as the charity SSAFA, Veterans UK and even the right part of the NHS. Obviously, in all our constituencies, there are many small veterans charities that can also assist.

I appreciate that many other people wish to speak, but I want to point out that this week is the centenary of the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund, a wonderful charity that has supported hundreds of thousands of people across the country over the last century. It has chosen to launch a wonderful campaign this week to mark its centenary. It is asking the wider community to identify RAF veterans, because it believes that more than 100,000 RAF veterans are not getting the support that they need, warrant or could do with. It is asking all of us to put those veterans back on the radar, which is appropriate for the RAF. I have today tabled an early-day motion on the subject; I hope that everybody in the Chamber will sign it.

There is nothing more important than ensuring that the people who serve, and served, our country get support from everyone in this place. I thank everybody for their support today.

5.42 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I am delighted to follow my neighbour, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), and to speak in this debate. My constituency is the proud home of a significant Army reserve centre on Anchor Road in Longton, which I have been pleased to visit on a couple of occasions. The city of Stoke-on-Trent has a proud history of recruitment and sacrifice across the British armed forces, as our local war memorials bear witness.

I have been a proud supporter of the Royal British Legion poppy appeal, having helped it with collections in my constituency, both out and about at British

Legion stalls, and by hosting a collection tin and sales of poppies in my constituency office. The remembrance parades that I have attended in previous years in Fenton and Longton have always been very well attended. In fact, the number of people from the community who attend them is increasing each year. That is a moving reminder of how much our present-day liberties rest on the sacrifices of those who came before us.

This year's Armed Forces Day will once again be marked at Queen's Park in Longton. The event is being organised by the North Staffordshire armed forces and veterans celebration committee, the Queen's Park Partnership, and Stoke-on-Trent City Council. I want to take this opportunity to thank them all, and the volunteers, without whom the event would not be possible. I especially thank the serving officers and veterans who will be taking part. There will be armed forces displays and vehicles, stalls and entertainment, and a parade for members of the forces, veterans associations, cadets and schools. As in every year, thousands of attendees are expected, and they will all, of course, be very welcome.

Queen's Park was opened in 1888, and was laid out under the instructions of the then mayor of Longton, John Aynsley—a member of the great Aynsley ceramics dynasty—on land that was donated by the Duke of Sutherland. I mention that because it illustrates the way in which Queen's Park is integral to Longton's history, civic obligation, generosity, and community spirit. It is eminently suited to hosting the Armed Forces Day celebration for our city and for all those in our community who have selflessly given service in the past, and to paying tribute to those who continue to serve in our armed forces today.

We are one nation, and the Armed Forces Day celebration is for people of all ages and all backgrounds. Places such as Queen's Park underline the fact that it is about bringing us all together, grounding us in our local communities with the common thread of our national armed services. It is, of course, a cross-party, or non-party political, occasion when we can all happily come together in thanks for what our forces do to keep us all safe.

I pay tribute to David Cameron's role in the establishment of the armed forces covenant as a statement of the moral obligation that exists for us all, as a nation, as a Government and as a legislature, to the armed forces and the communities from which they hail and to which they return. Support for people leaving the armed forces must reflect the obligation that we owe to those who serve our country. I fully support the efforts to help service leavers into employment, not least the expansion of the career transition partnership to all members of the armed forces who have completed basic training. Lord Ashcroft's work in that regard, ensuring that the transition for today's service leavers back to civilian life is smoother and supported, is to be praised—as, of course, is his extensive support for veterans charities and memorials.

Towards the end of last year, in November, I was pleased to host an event with Landau, a charitable organisation that has a base in Newstead in my constituency and is dedicated to helping people who face barriers to employment. It has been doing excellent work to support veterans living locally, who often experience many barriers and challenges when readjusting to civilian life. The event, which we organised with local employers and

which included partners from the Department for Work and Pensions and the Royal British Legion, focused on ensuring that more local employers signed up to be disability-confident and seek to help more veterans into employment.

The Minister mentioned how small the badges were that people wear to support our veterans. I think that, in the past, we have not always done quite enough to support our veterans. Last year, when I was part of a delegation to the United States to visit Congress, I was amazed to see, outside the office of nearly member of Congress, posters and flags dedicated to supporting veterans and those who had unfortunately fallen in war. I think that we need to do more in this country to support our veterans.

I am conscious that there are many calls for us to go further in taking time as a country to reflect on and celebrate the role of our armed forces, giving greater recognition to the incredible sacrifices that have been made for us all. Those calls, like the calls for us to increase funding for our armed forces in the forthcoming spending review, need careful and open-minded attention. My constituent Gloria Buckle, to whom I have spoken about that on a number of occasions, is one of the strong voices advocating an annual bank holiday dedicated to our veterans. I was pleased to hear that the early May bank holiday in 2020 is to be moved from Monday 4 May to Friday 8 May to mark the 75th anniversary of VE Day. That will enable people to pay full tribute to those who served. I hope that in future years that will become a more permanent feature, and that one of our existing bank holidays could be renamed Veterans Day to thank our veterans for all that they have done, and serving forces continue to do, for this country.

Our armed forces, perhaps more than any other institution under Her Majesty, unite our kingdom. As a country, we owe it to our service personnel and veterans to celebrate their work and dedication, and to remember their sacrifices. After all, we are free to enjoy a day such as this only because of their continuing vigilance in keeping us safe and free all year round.

5.49 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Madam Deputy Speaker, it is good to see you in the Chair for this debate.

I congratulate Provost William Hendrie of West Dunbartonshire Council on holding last weekend's Armed Forces Day in West Dunbartonshire in the recently refurbished borough hall in Dumbarton. I also mention the 7th Scots D Company reservists based in my constituency, in the ancient royal borough of Dumbarton, and thank them for their continued service; and Owen Sayers, the Deputy Lord Lieutenant, who I have known for many years and who does many charitable works on behalf of veterans across the whole of the west of Scotland.

The armed forces in Scotland have a very long history. Indeed, Scotland is a martial nation that since its earliest days has sought to reflect the nation within it. As far back as 1138, our late King David I led a diverse army of Normans, Germans, English, Northumbrians and—would you believe it—Cumbrians, although the less we say about the battle of the standard, the better. Reflecting on that martial history, we must note the appointment of a Bruce as Governor of Edinburgh castle. I am sure that all Members will wish to congratulate Major General

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

Alastair Bruce, especially as I know that, with the 700th anniversary this week of Bannockburn, he is especially delighted with his appointment.

Scotland's history is also a history in which the immemorial custom of service has been—I will be honest—abused. In the late 1700s, the promise of small plots to up to 75,000 highlanders further impoverished those in service and indeed sent many of their families into exile. The clearances were an unmitigated economic disaster and a human catastrophe, yet the years that lay ahead would see Scots from every walk of life fulfil their immemorial duty.

The horrors of world war one, in which my great uncle James Timlin fell the month before the armistice was signed, serves as a warning to politicians and tyrants alike that they must exhaust all diplomatic efforts before blowing the whistle to go over the top.

World war two saw death and destruction fall on so many, including those living in my community of West Dunbartonshire through the horror of the Clydebank blitz. Those who served not only changed the face of the European continent but returned home and battled to be treated as equals by a political elite. Without doubt the vast swathes of those serving in the armed forces at the time in Europe and the far east resolutely, through the ballot box, played their part in demanding the peace dividend. Their efforts to overcome national socialism also ensured that the post-1945 Governments would be held to account, with a legacy in health, housing, social security and ways that would not have been possible before.

Later conflicts would see my brother serve in Iraq and in Afghanistan twice. As other Members have testified, and probably will again in this debate, having family on the frontline brings the comprehension of war to the forefront of your mind. It is a comprehension I would not wish on anyone. My nephew last year passed out from the Royal Engineers, and I and his family fully appreciate the opportunities offered to him, bar one: he is not an employee. Armed Forces Day and the extending events around Armed Forces Week are laudable and are much-needed attempts to address the growing gap between those who serve and the society they protect, but I have often wondered—and reflected following what I have heard today—whether they could in fact make that gap grow wider. In all the talk of heroes and gallantry, we forget that those who serve are people doing an extraordinary job. Armed Forces Day will not be a success if it only seeks to place those who serve on a pedestal and does not have a ruthless and unrelenting focus on improving their terms and conditions. I know the Government are doing their best, and the Minister has often appeared in front of the Defence Committee to grapple with the myriad issues that are thrown up with regard to armed forces and veterans' welfare. They have, in the right hon. Members for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) and for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), two Ministers who speak with great authority and have great empathy for the job they do, but could it be that the complexity of the system often leads to the most simple and robust solutions not being implemented?

Last year, I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill to bring an armed forces representative body into being on a statutory footing. Sadly, it was a plan that did not

survive contact with the workings of this place, but I do not intend that to be the last we hear of it. An armed forces representative body is an idea whose time has come in this political state, as it has already in so many others. It would allow the 135,000 serving members of our armed forces to speak with one strong voice and, for the first time, give all of them access to the type of independent advice, on all aspects of their professional and personal lives, that members of trade unions elsewhere in the workforce have taken for granted for so long. Of course they would not have the power to strike, just as the police do not, but as any Home Secretary who has addressed the Police Federation conference knows, that does not make it any easier to ignore their bargaining power. I assume that that is the reason behind some of the more hysterical reactions to any suggestion of a so-called armed forces union. Giving serving members that voice and ability must surely be the most straightforward way to begin addressing all the issues we have heard about today.

The charities that many Members have spoken about today do a fantastic job in the circumstances, and many of them have historical pedigrees of which they can justifiably be proud, but we cannot and must not kid ourselves that they are able to reach every member of the armed forces in the way that they would like to. The varied nature of our defence establishments and their geographical spread make that all but impossible. Indeed, a system that is based principally on charity can often mean that some are less able to access services and advice, because they are not adept at navigating the vagaries of a social context that has not been constructed by them. A trade union is the time-honoured, tested fashion in which working people everywhere have been able to overcome social and economic barriers to advancement in the workplace, and it is time to extend that to the armed forces. This is quite simply normal practice among most of our close neighbours, and it has been rather counterintuitive to have to explain the UK's byzantine system to those for whom this is normal.

Let me bring my remarks to a close by reiterating that the people serving in the armed forces are doing an extraordinary job, and I therefore hope that we can begin to use Armed Forces Day as a way of focusing less on heroic language and more on ensuring that those people are paid, equipped and housed in the same way as every other worker doing their job expects to be.

5.58 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this debate ahead of Armed Forces Day on Saturday and on Reservists Day today. With that in mind, I shall start by paying tribute to the work of the reserve units based at Raglan barracks in Newport and thanking them for all they do for us. Armed Forces Day is an important way of ensuring we continue to recognise the service and sacrifice of our armed forces. A number of events are taking place in my constituency over the coming days to mark the occasion, including the civic flag-raising ceremony in Newport, the St Andrews armed forces cadet day in Lliswerry and the armed forces VE Day barbecue at Alway Primary School. I would also like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of the two Royal British Legion branches in my constituency, in Caldicot and Newport. They undertake great work all year round to support the forces community.

I also pay tribute to all those past and present who have served from my constituency. At this point, I was going to mention the neighbour of the 86-year-old veteran who rang my office to complain about the veteran not being eligible for a free TV licence and how disgusted he felt about that, but the Minister dealt with that earlier. Lastly, I pay tribute to the Afghan interpreters who have come to make their home in Newport and who, I feel, need greater help and clarity from the Government about how they can be reunited with their families.

Military history, like national history, is so often written about the officer class—those who make the major decisions—but it is important that we understand, too, what happens in defence and war to the ordinary soldier. History is also, importantly, about everyone who serves, their day-to-day experience and their life afterwards, including the trauma that they face as a result of the service that they gave to their country. I will therefore take the opportunity of today's debate to highlight the experiences and service of my constituent Anthony Lock, who was Corporal Anthony Lock, from Newport.

I appreciate the Minister's earlier remarks about keeping perspective, and the many positive stories and experiences that we have shared today, but I wish to put Anthony's story on the record. I recently read his brave and heartfelt book, *"Broken by War"*, which is a hugely powerful account of his time in combat, what he witnessed, how it affected him, his injuries, his recovery and, crucially, the lack of support offered to him throughout. He wrote the book to help others in his situation and to bring about change. I hope that Ministers will commit to read it, and will reflect again on what more needs to be done to support veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Anthony joined the armed forces after leaving school in Newport aged 17. He went on to serve with the Royal Welsh Regiment in Kosovo and Iraq. However, his life was to change forever after his service in Afghanistan, when he was hit by two improvised explosive devices in six weeks. The first explosion broke his neck, but he was misdiagnosed, so, unknowingly, he continued to serve on the frontline, surviving on pain killers.

The second IED explosion during his service in Helmand province very nearly ended Anthony's life. Thrown 30 feet in the air from the blast, he believes that he survived only because a rescue helicopter was nearby. His heart actually stopped beating for a time during the emergency flight to Camp Bastion, and he became the first British soldier serving in Afghanistan to be surgically operated on while in the air. He was the most injured soldier of his regiment in Afghanistan.

The life-changing injuries that Anthony experienced in Helmand were accompanied by the long-term legacy of post-traumatic stress disorder and severe depression. It is fair to say that he feels let down by his regiment. As he told me, in nine years there were nine close deaths around him and numerous traumatic events; yet not enough was done to help him through it. I think the Defence Committee acknowledged in its report the particular incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder among those in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Since leaving military service, Anthony has applied for many jobs, but to date has been unsuccessful. He has had help from military charities to write a CV, but otherwise the support has been limited, despite, as has been said a

few times in the debate, the obvious many skills and experience that he has to offer. I would like the Minister to look again at what is happening in JobCentre Plus with the armed forces champions that are supposed to be in place.

Anthony is grateful for the help that he has received from charities, particularly Poppy Practice, which is only a small charity but found Anthony as a result of reading his book. He has talked to me about the waiting times for appointments for veterans suffering from PTSD, which are far too long in the UK. He has also talked to me about the spike in PTSD-related veteran suicides in 2018—a tragic reminder of the need for Government at all levels to have a more effective response to mental health issues among current and former service personnel. Just today he told me that he believes that there have been 32 suicides this year that we know of.

Anthony still suffers every day from invisible injuries, and has said that he might not be here today were it not for the support of his partner Rhiannon and his daughter Katie. In a recent interview, he said:

"It's been hard for them too. I am angry in my head but not outside it. I am just nervous around people. I'm angry about what happened. I got blown up twice and life is difficult now...I did English, maths and management qualifications in the army but no one can find them now and employers can't see the person through a CV when you apply for jobs.

I don't sleep at night. I have nightmares about what happened to me".

He also said:

"If I had lost a limb my injuries would be more visible. If I walk down the street no one can see what I've been through but if someone has lost a leg people can see that."

Anthony deserves huge credit for his continued commitment to fighting for the dignity of veterans, and I recommend his excellent book, *"Broken by War"*, which powerfully recounts his experiences of war and encourages other veterans to reach out for support.

Ahead of today's debate, I asked Anthony what his main ask would be for improving the support available to veterans in our society. He told me that we need much quicker signposting of mental health support services within the forces community, a better system for handling the slow process of compensation and pension claims for those unable to work—the Defence Committee has also referenced that—help into work and recognition of the skills and experience of veterans, and, above all, a commitment from government at all levels to end the stigma around mental health in the armed forces.

In his own words, Anthony says

"the forces community are too proud, too shy and too scared to reach out for help."

He says that many veterans still feel the Government send young soldiers to war only to

"leave us to fight on our own when we return."

Anthony has served in some of the major conflicts since the second world war, but he is not a celebrity. So many veterans like Anthony are unknown individuals in society who could have become unknown soldiers lost on the battlefield, but their history and service are just as vital to the UK as that of any general, air marshal or captain. We have to listen to people like Anthony and we have to be told their stories.

6.6 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden). Anthony's story is very poignant, and we all understand what he, his family and his community have gone through. I appreciate that.

It is a great pleasure to participate in this debate and to have the Minister responding. As a native of my constituency, born and raised on the Isle of Anglesey, he will know that my constituency has a proud tradition of service in the armed forces, whether it be the Army—a huge number of recruits go into the Welsh regiments—the merchant navy, the Royal Navy or the Royal Air Force. RAF Valley trains our fast jet pilots to this day.

This year, we celebrated Armed Forces Day for the whole of north Wales on 25 May at Holyhead in my constituency. It was a wonderful seafront gathering, and the armed forces, cadets and various reservists all came together. The port of Holyhead has a proud history, including housing the whole Dutch navy during the second world war. I remember going to school with many people who had Dutch surnames. In fact, I am told that more than 90 Dutch sailors married local women during the second world war. It was not the Americans at the Valley air base but the Dutch sailors who got the women. There is a great tradition whereby we have a memorial to the Dutch navy, at which I helped to host an event with the Dutch embassy to celebrate the great European co-operation with our Dutch friends and allies.

The event on 25 May was not just a traditional celebration of Armed Forces Day and of the work of our armed forces; it was also a poignant occasion. We gave the freedom of the county of Anglesey to the Navy Submarine Service. In this debate we have heard the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) talk about her husband serving in the Submarine Service, which does a fantastic job. Personnel from the Navy Submarine Service told me that it was only the second time that it has been given the freedom of a borough or county—the first being the town and borough of Barrow-in-Furness. It was a great honour for the county of Anglesey, which I am proud to serve, to honour the submarine service, because we have a great seafaring tradition.

The Holyhead maritime museum is known throughout the country for its artefacts from Royal Navy and merchant navy seafarers, as well as from the important volunteers who go to sea in our lifeboats to keep our coastlines safe.

Our Armed Forces Day event on 25 May also had a special memorial to the submarine HMS Thetis. For those who do not know, HMS Thetis is in the history books for the wrong reasons. It was a T-class submarine of the Royal Navy that served under two names. Her first identity was HMS Thetis, and she commenced sea trials on 4 March 1939. She sank during those trials on 1 June 1939, with the loss of 99 lives. Many of those men are buried in my constituency and we had a special memorial for them on the 80th anniversary. She was salvaged, repaired and recommissioned under the name HMS Thunderbolt, serving in the Atlantic and Mediterranean until she was torpedoed and lost with all hands in 1943. That makes the Thetis one of the few military vessels in service history that have been

lost twice with their crews. It was a real sacrifice for those crews, and we rightly remembered them on that occasion.

I am an ex-merchant seafarer, and I want to concentrate part of my speech on the work and sacrifice of merchant seafarers for our country. During the second world war, for example, they kept the trade links open and the food coming to our island nation. I remember, as a 16-year-old on my first vessel, talking to older seafarers who had actually served in the convoys. One in particular, a ship's cook, joined the merchant navy at 17 and had been torpedoed and survived twice. He was left in the cold waters of the Atlantic while ships were being torpedoed, and bombed by fighter aircraft, around him. It is important to remember the conditions in which our merchant seafarers served during the world wars. We saw the D-day commemorations recently, and many merchant seafarers were involved in D-day. Many sea captains, using their seafaring skills, took the troops across to liberate mainland Europe. I am sure the Minister will join me in paying special tribute to the merchant navy.

More positively, last year we had commemorations in the House and in the country of the centenary of the great war. What was special about those commemorations was the fact that we were talking about real communities and real people. It was a great people's history, and we were able to celebrate the contribution made by local people to their community and their country. I am a great one for going around village memorial halls, and several small communities on Anglesey have memorial halls, as the Minister will know, that were built more than 100 years ago so that we should remember the great sacrifices made in the first world war. Many of them are rightly dedicated to those who lost their lives. They have now been revamped and are part of our living history. I would like to see small museums and galleries in those memorial halls so that we remember the dedication, service and sacrifice of the communities we all represent for ever and ever.

Before I came to the House 18 years ago, I ran a welfare unit for veterans and dealt with many ex-service personnel. It was difficult to diagnose many of the conditions that they had and to help them with benefits. We have improved considerably in the last 20 years, and I pay tribute to the last Labour Government, the coalition Government and the present Government for the work that they have done to help veterans. We have a dedicated veterans Minister and much support from charities, as well as the MOD. The Minister who opened the debate is no longer in his place, but, I have had correspondence with him as recently as last month—I will be coming back to him—and I know that he looks at these issues meticulously so that we are able to help veterans.

Our casework is getting more complicated and more and more veterans are coming to see us. We really need to target the issue of mental health. Great progress has been made in the House, with many Members talking about their own experiences, but, as the Prime Minister has rightly said, mental health treatment should have parity with physical health services. We must help our veterans. Many relatively young veterans have been in theatre and in many conflicts in recent years, and we must help and support them.

Today, Armed Forces Day, is an opportunity to celebrate not only the work that our armed forces do for our country, but people from communities throughout Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the dedication

and service that they have given us. I pay tribute to active service personnel, and to ex-service personnel too.

6.15 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in any debate that refers to the armed forces—it is always a pleasure to speak in the House, but this is a particular pleasure. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who unfortunately is no longer in his place, for his commitment as a soldier, as a reservist and as a Minister.

I thank all those who wear or have worn the uniform, serving this great country, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—as others have said, we are better together—through thick and thin. It is little wonder that our armed forces are the envy and measuring standard of the entire world. Our armed forces have supported us in times of peril—through two world wars, the troubles, Afghanistan and Iraq to name only a few. Today, they are stationed around the globe, carrying out work that we do not hear about, yet the world would be a worse place without their efforts and contributions. The blood that they shed and the burden they take upon themselves is all for you—I say that to everybody in the House—and for me as well. To think that they are not fully rewarded for their sacrifices and supported through their own times of peril is disappointing, to say the least.

I declare an interest—I should have done so at the beginning of my speech—as a former part-time soldier. I served for 14 and a half years in the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Territorial Army.

Just last Saturday, the gallant Minister was in Lisburn for Northern Ireland Armed Forces Day. It was a smashing day, as he rightly said. I have a request for him, or, in his absence, for the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), who will respond to the debate. Northern Ireland will be 100 years old in 2021; will Ministers consider a national Armed Forces Day in Northern Ireland to tie in with that centenary?

The armed forces are 9,900 trained personnel short of their Government-set target: the Royal Navy and Royal Marines are some 1,230 short of their 30,450 personnel target; the Royal Air Force is 1,740 short of its 31,750 personnel target; and the British Army is 6,930 short of its 82,000 personnel target.

We are fortunate in my constituency to have a strong tradition of service in all three of the services—the Royal Air Force, the Royal Navy and the Army. Conscription was never needed because the recruitment was always there. We also have strong TA battalions and batteries in the town, with a new Royal Irish Regiment section in the Crawfordsburn Road centre in Newtownards. We have that service ethic, so it is important to give people those opportunities. We also have active cadets in all three services.

The House might wonder why I brought up those figures, but the link is clear: why would someone put their physical and mental health on the line for the minimum wage? Why would they leave their family and all those they love for months on end when their Government—my Government—cannot give them pay that reflects their sacrifice? It is little wonder that so

many of our trained and elite leave the service and serve privately—the pay is quadruple that which the uniform pays. The shadow Secretary of State referred to pay, and she was absolutely right to—we need to think about that.

Why would someone take the minimum wage when, added to that, they now know that they could well be abandoned in later life should another armed regime such as the republicans seek to rewrite history? Would it not be fair to say that the treatment they can expect once they retire is the reason they are not joining? Just like soldier F, they have to contemplate the prospect of facing prosecution for doing their job. The Government have to do more to protect their soldiers. That issue has come forward on numerous occasions. Soldiers should be allowed to retire in peace; that is the least we can do for them. The Democratic Unionist party, of which I am proud to be a member and to speak on behalf of today, supports our armed forces. We will not watch silently as our armed forces are dragged on their knees to appear in court at the age of 75. The witch hunt must stop now.

Our soldiers cannot simply disobey orders. That is called insubordination, and they would be punished for it. They cannot win in that scenario. They face two choices: be punished by their superiors for disobeying orders and for not following the appropriate procedure, or be punished by the media agenda of the day and even by the judicial system. Why should they willingly have to sign up to that? They should not have to do so, but they do. I doubt soldier F knew that that was what he was signing up to. Our soldiers deserve better. The very least that they deserve for protecting us is the right to protection in the courts. The sacrifice that they make for all of us to sleep safely at night is immeasurable, yet that is how they are treated. On behalf of all those soldiers who face the prospect of an investigation, let us make it clear that we stand by them and support them in these legacy battles. I believe that there is a consensus of opinion in the House to support that view.

We should remember that the soldiers who did wrong were prosecuted during the troubles in the appropriate way through the Army. They did face justice. What they face now is not justice; it is unacceptable. It is a sop to a republican agenda, and the antithesis of justice. For all the sacrifices that they have made, it is appalling that they do not receive the support they need when they retire. Royal Irish veteran Robert McCartney of the charity Beyond the Battlefield has estimated that some 400 veterans attempt to take their own lives each year in Northern Ireland, 30 of whom succeed. Those statistics are accurate, and they reflect the concern that we have for our veterans in Northern Ireland. I commend Robert McCartney and many other charities such as the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association, Help for Heroes, St Dunstan's, and the Royal British Legion—they are almost too numerous to mention. They all help greatly, but we should be doing more to help our armed forces.

I do not think that there is one Member today who has not mentioned mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder or other mental issues that have come about because of things that have happened in the past.

Albert Owen: Will the hon. Gentleman add to that list of charities the Mission to Seafarers, which does excellent work for UK shipping veterans both here in the capital city and across the UK and the globe?

Jim Shannon: It is always good to be reminded of these things by the hon. Gentleman. As I said, aside from the ones that we know directly, there are many, many other charities that do fantastic work. The Royal Air Force Association looks after its veterans well; it does really fantastic work.

In Northern Ireland, it is estimated that some 17,000 veterans have some form of mental health problem—diagnosed or not. That is a massive number of people who need help and assistance right now. These appalling figures are not matched with enough support. I know that charities fill in the gap, and, as I have said before, I am very pleased with the steps that the Government have taken, particularly the Minister's Department. None the less, when we see magnitude of the number of veterans who have mental health issues, we should be thinking about setting extra money aside for them. The support that those veterans need should be made readily available to them, and I believe that we are failing in that regard.

I have been associated with SSAFA for a long, long time—since long before I became a Member of Parliament. My mother and father were also involved in that charity. We hold a coffee morning in September/October every year. The good people of Newtownards have contributed some £30,000 to the charity, selling tea, coffee and sticky buns. The Ulster man and the Ulster woman are very fond of their sweet stuff—as a diabetic I know that I should not be so fond of it. None the less, we do our best to help the veterans. We should also give credit to those Members in this House who have served so gallantly in uniform.

When the IRA were committing the countless atrocities during the troubles in Northern Ireland, it was the brave soldiers stationed in Northern Ireland who were there to help clean up the blood left behind and who tried their very best to limit the loss of life. These memories rage on in their minds to this day—a great burden that takes its toll.

The big gap in the rates of pay for our armed forces shocks me, especially when compared with our US counterparts. In our armed forces, the salary starts at £15,008, compared with that of the US army, which starts at £19,099. In 2018, the 2% pay rise for our armed forces was still below inflation, which was sitting at 2.4% at the time—for all that sacrifice. What kind of message does that send to our soldiers?

I hope those points show that action needs to be taken now. In a time of celebration for our armed forces, they should be able to join us. No longer should they have to face tough economic turmoil after retirement, no longer should they have to face the battle with their mental health following retirement, and no longer should we stand by and watch. Our servicemen deserve better. It is our duty to ensure that they are given better and are no longer persecuted for actions that they were commanded to undertake some 50 years ago. They helped us when we needed them. It is about time we helped them when they need us. We should do the right thing and give them the right pay and the right overtime—enough to keep their families at home, living while they fight to survive. We in this place must determine to do the right thing by them. I look to the Minister to outline in his response how these issues will be addressed, particularly the matter of pay. Then we will be beginning to do the right thing.

6.25 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I am pleased to respond to this debate on behalf of the Opposition, and I can honestly say that it has been an excellent debate. It has been consensual and genuinely cross-party in character, and we have heard from all parts of the House. I think it is true to say that there has been one resounding message, and that has been a message of appreciation for all that our armed forces do for our country and our people.

The official Armed Forces Day is on Saturday, with national celebrations in Salisbury in Wiltshire. Today is Reserves Day, and I was very warmed by and impressed to see the flags above Portcullis House and various Government Departments as I walked across Westminster bridge this morning. They were an important symbol. For me, that set the tone for the day and for this debate.

The tone of the debate was set very well by the Minister, who gave a significant statement. I very much hope that his remarks will not simply be confined to this Chamber, and that they will be studied carefully by the people who aspire to the leadership of the Conservative party and this country. The tone was also well set by my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), the shadow Secretary of State for Defence who is from Wales. She indicated a number of points on which we are all united, and mentioned the tremendous work and commitment that our armed forces provide to this country as well as some of the issues they are concerned about. It is only right and proper that we give attention to improving the situation for our armed forces and do not simply rest on our laurels. We recognise that things have to get better because we are talking about the defence of this country—and, frankly, nothing is more important.

The Minister and the shadow Secretary of State both emphasised the tremendous debt of gratitude that we owe to our armed forces. Both also referred to D-day—the significant landings that took place on those five beaches, and the paratroopers who went behind enemy lines and helped to liberate our continent. I attended an event on HMS Belfast organised by Blind Veterans UK. It was a very moving experience to hear at first hand from veterans about what they went through and the sacrifices they made. As a number of Members have said, what motivated them and all their compatriots who fought and died was not that they wanted to be brave, but that they believed it was their duty to do what they did.

A number of Members have referred to events being organised in their constituencies to commemorate and celebrate Armed Forces Day. We have heard eloquent remarks from a number of Members; I apologise if I do not mention them all. For me, it is worth noting the eloquent remarks by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth). I am delighted that it is my hon. Friend's birthday on Saturday. I am sure that at her local celebrations the armed forces will join everyone in singing happy birthday to her.

We heard similarly eloquent remarks by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), who quite correctly said that the armed forces unite our country: how true that is. My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) also made some eloquent remarks. I learned a great deal about the history of the

second world war, but I, for one, did not realise that there was a significant naval presence from the Dutch in Anglesey. I am sure that plenty will be written in the history of the island about the contribution that they made to the defence of our country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) made a very moving speech in which she referred to her constituent Anthony and the difficulties that he has experienced since he has done his best to get back into the world of work. I very much hope that the book he has written will indeed be read by many people and the lessons from it learned.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I wish briefly to thank a number of local organisations in my constituency for what they have done. Reading Borough Council has prioritised veterans in its housing register, in an area of high housing need. That is an important step. The town council in Woodley has put together a wonderful commemoration of the sacrifice in world war one, highlighting many local men who failed to return from Flanders. Many local voluntary and veterans' organisations have made contributions. I would like to thank them for their support for and recognition of the wonderful service that has taken place.

Wayne David: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I am sure that although his remarks were peculiar to his own constituency, they are generally applicable too.

I think that if we are serious about this, we recognise that it is not enough to be appreciative of the commitment made, past and present; it is also necessary to ensure that the defence of our country is based on the firm footing of the personnel in the armed forces. What is absolutely central for them in order to give of their best is the maintenance of a good state of morale. However, surveys have been conducted showing very clearly that the state of morale among the armed forces should be a cause for concern among us all. The impact of service life on family and personal life remains the top factor influencing the intention of many of our personnel to leave the armed forces. It saddens me to say that satisfaction with service life remains below the peak of 61% that was reported in 2009 and today stands at only 46%.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am going to ask the hon. Gentleman the same question that I have been asking Ministers and other shadow Ministers. If there is such a problem, why are we not agreeing that an armed forces representative body, without the right to strike, would be a good thing to allow people in the armed forces to inform policy?

Wayne David: That suggestion is worthy of serious consideration. It should not be dismissed, because there is a strong case for a collective voice for personnel in the armed forces so that Government can be helped by knowing exactly what they want and can respond accordingly. That is something to be carefully considered in future.

It is very important to send a clear message that, while there has been a great deal of progress and there is a great deal of pride among all of us, we want to see an improvement. We are concerned about the relatively low morale in large sections of the armed forces. Careful attention needs to be given to pay, to ensure that pay rises at least keep pace with inflation and we do not see

an erosion of the living standards of our armed forces personnel. Careful consideration should also be given to pensions, compensation and housing.

The Opposition are concerned about the apparent fixation of certain Conservative Members that outsourcing is good, no matter the circumstances and irrespective of the costs or implications. We have to be entirely objective and look at what works and delivers satisfactorily for our personnel. Unfortunately, it is our conclusion that much of the outsourcing is ideologically motivated and does not improve things for our personnel. We need to look carefully at whether it would be better to do much more in-house and ensure that we have the services and standards that our armed forces deserve.

I think in particular of housing. I know that the Ministry of Defence is piloting the future accommodation model. I agree with the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes); it would be useful if we had a mechanism that enabled us to hear directly from the armed forces and their representatives what they think about the situation, rather than Ministers believing they know best and simply creaming off the views of one or two individuals. The Government must engage fully and openly with the armed forces to ensure that they are acting in the interests of all personnel and are seen to be doing so.

We have to do two things: we have to commemorate and celebrate, and we also have to stand back and look coolly at how things can be improved. The atmosphere of the debate has certainly allowed us to do that. I would like to finish by echoing the remark made by the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan): we need to give one united and very big thank you.

6.37 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): I would like to echo the comments that the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) just made. The tone of the debate has clearly reflected the feeling of all Members across the House, and I think it accurately reflects the respect, admiration and support of the population out there for our armed forces. That set a really good tone for the debate; if only all debates in this Chamber were so constructive.

Members have clearly demonstrated a very good understanding of not only what is so important to our armed forces, but the challenges faced by both the regular and reserve forces. Our military personnel are incredibly brave, protecting not only our shores but, frankly, our way of life. They do that day in, day out in a world that continues to become increasingly dangerous. The fact that they do that in not only the UK but across the globe is something we should always be thankful for. They take on dangerous and demanding tasks without complaint—they just get on with it. They see it as their job and their duty, and they do it with great service. There is a duty on all of us, in return, to say thank you and show them that everything they do is not taken for granted. It is right for us to ensure that they are not disadvantaged, whether in the workplace or the provision of services, by the fact that they took part in military service.

We have heard a lot this afternoon about the armed forces covenant, which the Government and Members across the House are steadfastly supportive of. It is a promise from the nation to serving personnel and veterans

[Stuart Andrew]

and their families, to ensure that they are treated fairly and not disadvantaged as a result of the service they have given to our nation. It is great to see that across the UK—whether it be the UK Government, the devolved Administrations, local authorities, charities big and small or businesses—there is a real desire to sign up to the covenant and to ensure that we give that special recognition and that thank you, covering all the important areas, including education, health and housing, and recognising the skills of many of our veterans, which could provide valuable inputs to businesses across the UK. It is great that, since the launch of the covenant eight years ago, we are now close to the 4,000th organisation signing up, with Facebook being among the latest to do so this week.

We are preparing for Armed Forces Day on Saturday. I am looking forward to going to an event in my own constituency that Lyn Rigby, the mother of Fusilier Lee Rigby, will be attending. I am going to Swansea later, so I will be going back to my roots in Wales. That shows the breadth of events that are being held all over the country and the wonderful support for the armed forces.

It is important to remind ourselves that today is Reserves Day. That reminds me of the last Defence questions, when the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), said that three Members on the Government Front Bench were reservists and kindly pointed out that I am the one who is not. *[Interruption.]* Indeed, there is still time. I saw that one political sketch writer wrote the next day that I looked rather crestfallen at my right hon. Friend's comments and that he could not quite see me in a military tunic, but could well see me in a Butlin's Redcoat. I have to say that was harsh, but it is probably fair.

Yesterday, I was with my right hon. Friend at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, where we had a brilliant reception, and this morning we had a breakfast reception in Downing Street. It was great listening to reservists from all walks of life who work for Government and act as reservists, so they are serving the nation twice. They give so much to our nation and put themselves in incredible danger. Listening to one serving in Somalia really made me realise the enormous sacrifice they make in giving up their time to serve our nation in the reserves.

I want to come on to a few other points. I am conscious of the time, but I will try to get through as many of them as possible. The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), rightly raised a number of issues. Recruitment is an issue that I know has been brought up on many occasions, and rightly so. However, the contract we have with Capita remains subject to financial penalties and it has been penalised in the past. We are working very closely with Capita to ensure that the reset in the relationship we have brings about the results we expect to see. In 2018-19, we saw the highest number of applications for five years, with over 77,000 soldier applications alone, so there is good momentum. However, I assure her that we are not resting on our laurels. We are making sure that we are looking at that and continue to keep the pressure on, because keeping up the numbers is incredibly important.

The hon. Lady asked if I could provide an update on the 2019 pay award. I am afraid that I cannot give any specific information because there has been some delay, but I can give her the assurance that it will be backdated to ensure that nobody loses out. There was a comment about an independent body. Well, that does exist: the Armed Forces Pay Review Body provides independent advice both to the Prime Minister and to the Secretary of State for Defence.

Another important issue is access to schools. This is where the Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board is really useful because we do have cross-Government Departments there. We are raising that matter with the Department for Education. It is important that we provide as much stability as possible to the families but, as I say, we will continue to raise that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) rightly referred to the importance of our armed forces and the sacrifice of many of them. She also reminded us of the armed forces parliamentary scheme. It is important. It is a good advert. If Members have not done it, enrol. Those involved would love to see them, so I encourage Members to do so.

James Gray: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and I must apologise for missing most of the debate as I was chairing something elsewhere. One or two Ministers have taken part in the armed forces parliamentary scheme, and one of the good things that happened is that they got a uniform. We would certainly welcome my hon. Friend if he wanted to come and join.

Stuart Andrew: Well, I walked into that one, didn't I? I was going to say, let us see what happens in a couple of weeks' time, but I might not be here.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) introduced her husband to the Chamber, and I had the pleasure of meeting him in Glasgow a few weeks ago. I certainly thank him for his service. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we must not be complacent about the support that we offer to members of our armed forces—those who are serving, but also those who are veterans. Also, we ought to do a better sell of what it is like to join the armed forces. Sometimes, I think the public have a certain perception of what is on offer in terms of the trades people can learn and the skills they can acquire, and we are not as good at selling those aspects as we could be, so I will take that point back to the Department.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) rightly reminded us of his constituency's proud armed forces history, and he was right to raise points about housing and mental health in particular. A number of Members raised the issue of mental health. As I think we all recognise, mental health was previously not discussed in this Chamber, certainly not when I was first elected in 2010.

I remember the first time a Member of Parliament stood up in this Chamber to talk about their own mental health. That was a turning point; the fact that we all now discuss the issue can only be a step in the right direction. We have to make sure that we provide that support to members of our armed forces and that they have the confidence to talk about the issue too.

We had contributions from the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton).

I wish the hon. Lady a happy birthday—the whole city will be out celebrating with her, I am sure. She rightly pointed out that next year we have the VE Day and VJ Day anniversaries. We must make sure that we celebrate in style. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South talked about the services we provide to people who leave the armed forces. Later this year, we will have the new transition policy, which we have been working on, and I hope that under it things will be looked at earlier. We want to cover all the issues that the armed forces face, and to include the family too, because families are critical.

I want to mention the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden). It was really quite moving listening to her talk about her constituent, Anthony Lock, and in particular the support he has received from Rhiannon and Katie. It just goes to show that, when we get somebody signed up to the armed forces, we often get not just that individual, but the whole family. We must never forget that, when we say thank you to the people who have served in our armed forces, we are also saying thank you to the wider family.

The hon. Lady made some points to which I want to respond. First, I will make sure I read the book. Secondly, I will speak to Baroness Buscombe about Jobcentre Plus; that is really important. I will come back to the hon. Lady on the other points she raised.

It is always good to hear from the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen); I am from Anglesey myself. My dad was in the merchant navy, so I know all about the merchant navy and many of the memorial halls that the hon. Gentleman was talking about.

Wayne David: Was your dad Dutch?

Stuart Andrew: No, he wasn't Dutch.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about national Armed Forces Day. Of course, it is open to all local authorities to apply, so we look forward to seeing applications from across the country, including one from Northern Ireland, I am sure.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): This has been an excellent debate and a timely reminder of the importance of thanking those who step forward to serve in our armed forces. On local authorities putting themselves forward to host Armed Forces Day, as a fellow Yorkshire Member of Parliament—there is another Yorkshire Member in the Chamber—will the Minister send our very best wishes to Scarborough as it prepares to host Armed Forces Day next year? I am sure that, collectively, we want to ensure that that day is a stunning success—not just for the country, but for Yorkshire.

Stuart Andrew: Absolutely. I am doing a tour of the country now. It is great news that next year the event will be going to Scarborough. Earl Howe will be there this year to support that. It is going to be great news for Yorkshire and for the whole of the country.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Just to continue with the Yorkshire theme, may I suggest, as a fellow Yorkshire Member of Parliament and with regard to my hon. Friend's earlier comments about being a reservist, that he might think about signing up as a reservist for the Yorkshire Regiment?

Stuart Andrew: There are a lot of offers. I expect that my diary will get extremely busy. Let me just say that I will take everything into consideration and I will get back to my hon. Friend.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I noticed that the Minister side-stepped completely the questions I raised in my speech. I did at least elicit some support from the Opposition Benches with regard to an armed forces representative body. I think I am correct in saying that in a Select Committee evidence session the Chief of the Defence Staff hinted, in response to my question, that an armed forces representative body was worthy of consideration. Why do the Government not think it is?

Stuart Andrew: I do apologise. I did mean to address that point, which is on my sheet. I was not trying to side-step the issue. There are a number of avenues that members of the armed forces are able to use to register any concerns and complaints they may have with the armed forces, and they will be looked at very closely. The personnel we have are the greatest asset we have in the Ministry of Defence and we want to ensure that their issues are addressed—and they are, if I can give the hon. Gentleman that assurance.

Carol Monaghan: Will the Minister give way?

Stuart Andrew: I need to finish now, but I will happily speak to hon. Members after the debate.

We have had a really good debate. The hon. Member for Caerphilly was right to say that the tone has been absolutely right. I am glad to have been able to respond to the debate. I thank all Members for their contributions. It is clear that all of us, as a society, are very supportive of our brave armed forces community, whether they serve at home or overseas, whether they are veterans, or whether they are families, who do so much to sustain them. This week's Armed Forces Day gives the whole nation the opportunity to show their appreciation and gratitude to those who have given so much.

I endorse strongly the call to the whole House from the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East, to get involved in the rich programme of Armed Forces Day events that will happen this week. I know that many have already committed to doing so, which is fantastic. Whether they are happening in their constituencies, their regional areas or at a national level, this is a great opportunity for us as a country to say, very sincerely, thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Armed Forces Day.

PETITIONS

Nnamani family, Glasgow

6.53 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the residents of Paisley and Renfrewshire North, who join in solidarity with the Church of Our Lady and St George in Penilee in Glasgow South West, a mere stone's throw from my own constituency. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for collating these signatures, and for the work he has done on behalf of Mary Nnamani and her family.

[Gavin Newlands]

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Paisley North,

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

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

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002481]

NHS Hospital Services in the Consett Area

6.54 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I have a petition from residents in North West Durham, who are hoping that the Government listen.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of North West Durham,

Declares that a succession of Government funding reductions has led to fewer services being delivered at Shotley Bridge Hospital; and further that this reduction of services threatens the viability of a community hospital in the Consett Area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to ensure there is no reduction of local NHS Hospital services in the Consett area.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002482]

Disabled Access: Thirsk Station

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

6.55 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I am grateful to you for granting this important debate, Mr Speaker, because train travel has never been more popular or important. Around 20,000 miles of railway track criss-cross our island, and altogether we made 1.8 billion rail journeys last year—a 3% rise on the previous year. I am a frequent rail user, boarding a train every week at York or Thirsk that whisks me to Westminster to represent my constituents, and then boarding another to return home to glorious North Yorkshire in time for my surgeries and visits at the weekend. Importantly, this week the Government legislated for a target of net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Using public transport is one way that we can help to tackle climate change and improve air quality.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This week, most Members across the House took the decision to drive for that net zero carbon outcome for the UK, but that can be achieved only if more people make use of public transport. The fact that those who are disabled are precluded from using many railway stations, such as Thirsk, due to the lack of facilities is absurd. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government must, in future policy relating to climate change targets, enable all people to travel on public transport, not just those who are able-bodied?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. As I will say later, around 40% of stations do not have access for disabled people, and we know that disabled people are accounting for a greater and greater proportion of our population, so this is hugely important. I am grateful for his intervention.

We need to encourage train use for all users and facilitate access to stations. Trains allow us to commute and explore the length and breadth of our country, from Thurso in the very north of Scotland to St Ives in Cornwall, both of which, I must mention, are replete with step-free access for disabled passengers. This is the essence of the problem: these essentials cannot just be for those who are in the physical prime of their life. Trains and the 2,500 stations that they pass through should be made more accessible for everyone. Everyone, including disabled people, the elderly and parents pushing prams, should have the same opportunity to travel by train.

In particular, Thirsk railway station in my constituency is in need of accessibility improvements, which will make a real difference to people's lives. As with most stations, trains travel through Thirsk extremely quickly—I have stood on the platform when trains come through at over 100 miles an hour—but Thirsk is unique in that it has an island ticket office and platforms stationed between the tracks. Concrete steps are the only way to access the ticket office and platforms. Passengers must reach the ticket office and both platforms by navigating a barrow crossing the high-speed railway line. This can be a very difficult and even traumatic experience for the elderly, disabled passengers, parents with pushchairs or people heaving heavy suitcases. Thirsk is not alone:

40% of railway stations in England, Scotland and Wales do not have step-free access, and research found that over a third of working-age disabled people had experienced problems using trains in the last year as a result of their disability. A solution is much needed.

The railway industry is on the right track: it is encouraging more people to travel by train using the disabled persons railcard; carriages have been adapted; and I regularly see ramps on platforms, and kindly staff going above and beyond to facilitate access for passengers. Information is also improving and becoming more widely available to disabled users. National Rail has published an access map online, which is a great resource for disabled passengers, but it also highlights the limited access they have to railway stations in my constituency. I quote the entry for Thirsk station:

“customers should note that access to all platforms is via a barrow crossing”—

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Kevin Hollinrake: The entry continues—

“which is reliant upon staff assistance, and cannot be accessed outside of staffed hours.”

Fortunately, we are starting from a good place in this debate, as improving access to our railway stations for disabled passengers is very much a key priority for the Government. As for further down the line, Network Rail is working towards an entirely accessible transport network by 2030, in which there will be assistance if physical infrastructure remains a barrier. That timetable will remind those of us who remember train travel before privatisation of the British Rail slogan, which is apt: “We’re getting there”.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary and the Minister, whom I met to discuss these issues and our bid to the Access for All funding programme. Access for All is providing £300 million of additional funding to make 73 stations more accessible by 2024. Unfortunately, Thirsk is not one of them. I felt that our campaign was good, and was building up a head of steam. It had strong support from Graham Meiklejohn at TransPennine Express, Grand Central, Graham North for North Yorkshire County Council, Professor Abrahams of the Northallerton and Thirsk Rail Users Group, members of the public, and of course me. I am grateful to all those people, with whom I work very closely on this issue.

Our bid was unsuccessful. Apparently, we fell short on footfall. However, the number of users on these routes continues to increase. There was a 3.6% increase this year, and the population of Hambleton is expected to grow by 4% by 2035, which of course will mean more disabled and elderly people there. I am disappointed that our bid was unsuccessful, but to be fair I am not sure that we adequately highlighted the fact that there is no unaided access to any platform at Thirsk station. We need to revisit our bid, make it more compelling, and point out the growing issues at the station. According to the Rail Delivery Group, in 2018, there were 6,700 people using a disabled person’s railcard in my constituency. That is up from 4,200 in 2015—an increase of 59%. It is great that more people are saving money on their journeys,

but what is the point of encouraging the use of that railcard if its users are deterred from using the train, or simply cannot access the platform?

According to the Office for National Statistics, nearly one in five people in England and Wales have some form of disability. Leonard Cheshire estimates that almost 45,000 journeys are made by disabled people at Thirsk station each year. The Equality Act 2010, which I know the Minister is very familiar with, urges the Secretary of State to make regulations to allow disabled persons to travel without unreasonable difficulty in safety and reasonable comfort. I call on the Minister, the Secretary of State and the Department for Transport to ensure that that can happen at Thirsk railway station.

I appreciate that funds are always in short supply; there is no magic money tree. Elected representatives, including my colleagues in the Department, must always consider those footing the bill—the taxpayer—and, of course, value for money. I am keen to work with the Department, TransPennine Express, local authorities and local enterprise partnerships to find a solution. I am very flexible in my approach to ensuring better access to the station. Rather than putting in two lifts, one on either side of the bridge, there is perhaps a business case for putting in a lift on one side of it, and for moving the ticket office on the platform to the other side. That would be a cheaper option. It would save us perhaps around £1 million in our bid. It will be interesting to see what further funding might be made available to facilitate that solution.

As I say, there are alternative cost-effective solutions. I would be keen to hear more from the Department about what can be done. I invite the Minister to Thirsk—it is always a pleasure for anyone to visit Thirsk—to meet the groups I mentioned and help develop a plan. Facilitating access is something we can all get on board with. I look forward to working with Ministers to develop a plan to improve disabled access at Thirsk station and, over time, to see better access to public transport for all.

7.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on securing the debate and giving the House an opportunity to address the important subject of accessibility on the railway network. I recognise how important it is for his constituents to have access to the railway, not only to travel to and from work but to see family and friends and go about their daily lives. I must place on record what a strong advocate he has been for his constituents. I know that he is bitterly disappointed by the result of the bid, and I hope that he will allow me to try to explain it.

I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) is also in the Chamber. I believe that he was also very disappointed by the result, and that he, too, campaigned very boldly on behalf of his constituents. I hope that he will remain for the entire debate so that he can hear what more can be made available for his local stations.

Delivering a transport system that is truly accessible to all is of great importance to me. I know that my hon. Friend is aware of the Department for Transport’s inclusive transport strategy, which was published last July. I hope that he takes it as evidence of the Government’s

[Ms Nusrat Ghani]

commitment to action to safeguard and promote the rights of all disabled passengers. We do not deny that our strategy is ambitious, but we are determined to deliver it. We want disabled people to have the same access to transport as everyone else by 2030, and if physical infrastructure remains a barrier, assistance will play a role in guaranteeing those rights. I am always told that I am not allowed to repeat this, but I believe that ours is the only country to have such a bold strategy in place. An accessible transport network is central to the Government's wider ambition to build a society that works for all.

I was pleased to have an opportunity to discuss the specific issues at Thirsk with my hon. Friend back in April. The station was nominated for the additional funding that we are making available over the next five years for the Access for All programme, but it was not successful. As I explained to my hon. Friend when we met, the available funding was heavily over-subscribed. Other stations nominated in the Yorkshire and Humber area had a higher-weighted footfall, which made it difficult to justify Thirsk's inclusion ahead of other busier stations in the region.

In the event of any future funding bids for Thirsk and, indeed, other stations—I ask my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham to reflect on this—the stations will need to be given a high priority by the industry. The bids will need to be compelling and to have local support, and, ideally, there will be match funding. In the case of most of the new Access for All projects announced in April, significant levels of third-party funding were included in the bids.

As my hon. Friend knows, step-free access is technically available throughout Thirsk station. However, customers must be aware that access to all platforms is via a barrow crossing, which is reliant on staff assistance and cannot be accessed outside staff hours. As my hon. Friend said in his speech, it is not the easiest space to be in for the able-bodied, let alone disabled people. That reflects the fact that most of our stations are Victorian. Those 19th-century stations were not built with the needs of 21st-century passengers in mind, which has left us with the huge task of opening up the rail network to disabled passengers.

Kevin Hollinrake: I understand that other stations are in a similar position, but how unusual is it for a station to provide no access to either platform, for either inbound or outbound trains, apart from a barrow crossing, because there is an island platform and an island ticket office?

Ms Ghani: Thirsk has particular, unique circumstances, but it is not the only station that is not fully accessible at all times, which is why I think it important to ensure that any bid for Thirsk is rated highly by the train operating company and also comes with match funding. However, I entirely accept that it is not the easiest place to be when trains are whizzing past at high speed.

We must recognise that 75% of journeys are through step-free stations, but that is not good enough; we want to ensure that even more journeys are accessible as well. That is why we continue the Access for All programme. The inclusive transport strategy included a commitment to extend our Access for All programme across control period 6 between 2019 and 2024, with an additional

£300 million of funding from the public purse. Those funds will allow design work to restart on all the projects deferred by the 2016 Hendy review into Network Rail delivery and to include even more stations in the programme.

We asked the industry to nominate stations and received more than 300 nominations. Often these nominations were in partnership with local authorities and Members of Parliament, and we must not forget the important local councillors as well. Back in April, we announced that 73 stations would receive funding, including 46 new stations and 27 stations from CP5 deferred by Sir Peter Hendy.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton will be pleased to hear—I am also pleased to inform the House of this—that I have also made £20 million available for mid-tier Access for All projects. The criteria—[*Interruption.*] Yes, we will be waiting for those applications for stations to come in, but the criteria for selecting projects will be different from the main programme, as we will focus on stations where accessibility improvements can be delivered with up to £1 million of Government support alongside—I must stress this—significant third-party match funding.

Details of how this funding will be allocated are being finalised now, and we intend to open the nomination process shortly. I will write to all hon. Members to inform them when this happens, and of course I will drop a personal note to my hon. Friends to ensure that they do not miss the deadline for the application.

I want to reflect on the industry's obligations. It is obliged to ensure that disabled passengers are supported. Each operator is required to have a disabled person's protection policy in place as part of its licence to operate services; the policy sets out the services that disabled passengers can expect and what to do if things go wrong and commits the operator to meeting its legal obligations by making reasonable adjustments to its services to allow disabled people to use them—for example, by providing an accessible taxi free of charge to anyone unable to access a station.

The Office of Rail and Road recently consulted on revised disabled people's protection policy guidance, and I have also encouraged the ORR to take enforcement action against train and station operators who are not meeting their disabled people's protection policy obligations. Every disabled passenger should be confident that the assistance they have booked will be provided. The Department has worked with the Rail Delivery Group to create the new passenger assistance application, which will make it much easier for disabled passengers to book assistance. Many Members will have attended the event organised by the RDG last week to showcase this work.

We also support the ORR's proposal to introduce a handover protocol as part of the revised disabled people's protection policy guidance, and we have actively supported the establishment by the industry of an independent rail ombudsman with powers to deal with unresolved passenger complaints.

I hope that I have demonstrated that the Government are committed to improving access at stations for disabled passengers through both specific projects such as Access for All and improvements delivered as part of our wider commitment to improving the rail network. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton has been reassured that the Government remain committed

to investment that will improve rail services and accessibility on the network, and I look forward to receiving an application on behalf of his station, Thirsk, in the next round of funding. I wish him and my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham well.

Question put and agreed to.

7.13 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 26 June 2019

[MR JAMES GRAY *in the Chair*]

NHS Pensions

9.30 am

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered NHS pensions, annual and lifetime allowances.

I begin by declaring an interest, because anybody who has been in the parliamentary pension scheme is affected by annual allowance and lifetime allowance. Therefore, some of the things I say may reflect on me and maybe other hon. Members, so I suggest they make a declaration as well—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman may be right to say that all hon. Members may be affected by that matter, but for each individual to have to make that declaration would, I think, be otiose.

Sir Robert Syms: Thank you, Mr Gray. This is an important subject, and the more I learn about it, the more I realise its implications for the national health service. I had originally been told that the Treasury would respond to the debate, but I understand that the Department of Health and Social Care has manfully stepped up to the plate—the first example I have seen of a hospital pass to a Department.

The subject has devastating implications for the NHS, dental services and many other services in this country unless it is addressed by the Government. When the coalition Government came into office in 2010-11, they were quite right to reduce the amount of money that could be put into pension funds. At that time, someone could put £255,000 into a pension fund tax free; clearly, if they had such resources, it was unfair on the lower paid. The Government moved to reduce the tax leakage by reducing a number of the allowances.

The problem today is that the Government have drawn the allowances too tight, and in 2015-16 they also introduced a taper to the annual allowance. All that is having a pernicious effect on the NHS and creating what the British Medical Association has called a “perfect storm”. The lifetime allowance, which is just over £1,055,000, is such that most senior doctors and general practitioners get pulled into additional tax, paid at 55%. That raises the question whether they should continue working or retire early; there is a lot of evidence that members of the medical profession are deliberately retiring early because of the implications of working longer.

The annual allowance of £40,000 is creating problems of supplementary tax bills, which are falling at the doors of consultants, doctors and senior nurses. That £40,000 is made up of the increase in the fund and contributions, in a slightly convoluted formula, but the introduction of the taper and the way that it operates cause particular havoc. For higher earners, a strict regime applies to annual contributions, which is known as tapered annual allowance. It applies to people who have both adjusted income over £150,000 per year, which is total taxable income plus the real growth in value of pension rights

over the year, and threshold income above £110,000 per year, which is essentially total taxable income, but net the value of any employee pension contributions.

Where an individual ticks both boxes, for every £2 of adjusted income that they receive above the £150,000 level, their annual allowance is reduced by £1. This means that those with an adjusted income of £210,000 have their annual allowance tapered down from £40,000 to £10,000, the lowest level to which tapering can reduce the annual allowance. That tapered allowance was introduced in 2016-17. The ability to carry forward unused allowances for years before the taper was enforced has so far helped to dampen down its impact, but in 2019-20, carry-forward will be from no earlier than 2016-17, when the taper came into force. That will reduce the number of people with significant amounts of underused annual allowance available, and as a result the taper will bite rather more than in earlier years.

If we look at the figures, we see the number of people who exceed annual allowance or hit the taper multiplying each year, pulling many more people into the system. Many senior doctors earn enough money from their core hours plus additional shifts to be potentially affected by the tapered annual allowance. In addition, because of the relative generosity of the NHS pension scheme, pension rights can be built up quite quickly, especially for those who have experienced a step-up in pension rights because of a promotion. Paradoxically, in most cases overtime shifts are not pensionable. That means that a doctor can find that, by working more, he or she has built up no extra pension but, because of the operation of the tapered annual allowance, has reduced the amount of pension that he or she can build up within the tax relief limits.

All that leads to more complexity within the system. It is extremely difficult for someone to work out whether they have an annual allowance issue; that is true for any high earner, but may be particularly true for those in the NHS, because they have rights under different sections of NHS pension schemes—for example, a final salary pension and a career average pension. Those rights are tested against annual allowance, but a negative accrual in one scheme cannot be set against a positive accrual in another scheme.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech on an area that is technical, but has enormous implications. I have been contacted by a consultant in emergency medicine at Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, who has indicated that because of the perverse incentives of this scheme, he will not be taking on an extra shift and out-of-hours work, which reduces that vital expertise. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must turn this around so that we have frontline medics doing what they should be doing—caring for our patients?

Sir Robert Syms: Almost anybody I talk to in any hospital anywhere has an example of the impact of this additional taxation biting, and its impact on working methods. I know my hon. Friend has tried to get a debate on a similar subject, because we are ultimately talking not about consultants, but about the patients and the impact this has on delivering services.

For defined benefit pension rights, the test against annual allowance is complex. The growth in rights over the year must be adjusted to strip out any increase that

[*Sir Robert Syms*]

simply keeps pace with inflation, and is then multiplied by 16 added to any additional lump sum accrual before being tested. Whether the tapered annual allowance applies depends not just on whether someone's adjusted income is over £150,000, but on whether their threshold income is over £110,000. These two measures are quite different, and adjusted income in particular is calculated in a very complicated way.

That creates unpredictability. A tapered allowance works by using income from the current year to determine the size of the annual allowance for the current year. Many NHS doctors work extra NHS shifts and many do private work; they may have little idea what their income for the year will be until very late in the year. Sometimes, NHS trusts get additional money released at the end of the year, leading to more operations. Sometimes, NHS trusts pay at a rather slow rate, and they may pay in a different year from that in which an operation was undertaken. As a result, doctors who take on a lot of extra work late in the year can suddenly find they have an annual allowance issue.

There is also a cliff edge issue. Although the tapered annual allowance result is a gradual reduction in annual allowance for each £1 of adjusted income over £150,000 per year, the fact that the whole system switches on abruptly for threshold income above £110,000 can create a violent cliff edge effect. For example, those with threshold income that is 1p below £110,000 can effectively ignore the tapered annual allowance, but those with income that is 1p above it can find themselves caught with a rather large tax bill. For the latter group, not only does each extra £1 attract income tax at 40p and a loss of personal allowance equivalent to another 20p in the pound, but they can suddenly face a big drop in their annual allowance.

Some people can be worse off overall by working an extra shift. I have heard testimony to that effect from many doctors who say they have done additional work and ended up worse off.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I hope he will not mind my taking the opportunity to plug the event I am hosting with the BMA next Wednesday between 4 pm and 6 pm, which will be a great opportunity for MPs to meet many consultants with stories such as this, and to find out more information about the problem. Does he agree that, because this matter is so complex, it is important for MPs to come along and speak to the BMA, and speak to their local senior consultants, to really understand the impact this is having on the ground?

Sir Robert Syms: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. This is an area that people start to get interested in only when they start thinking about retirement. Then they realise how complicated the retirement rules are. This issue is upsetting many people who work in the NHS because of the impact it is having.

A survey of GPs to which 46% replied—354—found that their average tax bill owing to the tapered allowance was £18,500, so we really are talking about considerable sums of money being levied on doctors, many of whom do not expect it and suddenly get into arrears. Dr George McInnes, radiologist at Poole Hospital, said to me that

most of his radiologists are contracted for 10 sessions, with most working 11 or 12 as a matter of norm to keep the throughput going. However, as is the case in most hospitals, he now finds it terribly difficult to get them to do more than 10, and when people come to review their contracts, they ask to do less work, rather than more, because of the impact of the pension arrangements.

The real problem is that most of the people affected have done years of training and have years of experience—they are the super strikers of the NHS; the team leaders—and despite tax bills have a loyalty to their hospitals and teams and continue working. However, year on year, they find themselves penalised for working. As rational people, they decide to play golf or to spend more time with their families or with Netflix. That is logical, and the Treasury is deterring many people from doing what they have trained for their whole lives to do. The letters, emails and phone calls I get from doctors do not say that they want to work less. They actually want to work more, but they do not really feel that they should work more and be worse off as a result.

The Government have put additional resources into the NHS, and we can argue about whether it is enough or not. However, the key point from the Treasury and the Department of Health and Social Care was the importance of productivity in the NHS, which we can get only if the people within the service are actually able to deal with patients and the issues before them. If, because of the tax issue, people work less, the only way around that—apart from locums, if they can be recruited—is to recruit more people to do fewer operations. That is not increased productivity; that is reduced productivity. If we want to use these people, we have to set a tax system that is proportionate and sensible.

It is not only the NHS. The British Dental Association says the same thing: people are retiring early and are more averse to taking on NHS patients. The consequence is the problem that we are now starting to see, which will get worse and worse. I know that the Department of Health and Social Care understands the issue; I have talked to the Secretary of State. I think the Treasury sort of understands that there is a problem, which is why I think it indicated that it might give additional resources to the NHS. However, the problem is that the only way out of this is to get rid of the taper, because its impact on the way people work is so detrimental to the NHS. Even if we take into account wider issues and other areas, I cannot see how any scheme can be brought in to ameliorate its impact.

We in this House want patients to get the best service, and sometimes we have to pay people to get the best service in the national health service. Most consultants or senior nurses have trained for years and are dedicated to their patients, and all they want to do is to turn up and work. The Government have put money into the NHS to allow operations to take place, but perversely our system of taxation on pensions, which was probably drawn up to stop city slickers avoiding tax, is impacting on a major, important public service and will lead to longer waiting lists, meaning people—who, if not in pain, will be very uncomfortable—waiting to be dealt with.

We all want people to be dealt with, doctors to be happy and the NHS to work properly. We need the Treasury to get out of the way on this one, because it is causing problems.

9.43 am

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I commend the hon. Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms) for bringing this important debate to the Chamber. I did not intend to speak, but I feel obliged to do so now. I understand why this scheme was brought forward. It is not the scheme that I have problems with but its implementation and the unintended consequences, which have already been raised.

The situation in the NHS is complex. We have three NHS pension schemes, and it is really difficult to work out; I am part of two of them and I struggle to work out what I am supposed to be doing. We understand that it is difficult. The taper comes in at £110,000. The Chancellor told me in the Chamber that it is £150,000, but it is not. This is important, because although these wages seem a lot to some people, they are not that high compared with those of senior businesspeople. The taper will affect people such as consultants, GPs and medical academics. These are our leaders, and we need to ensure that there is succession planning. If these people leave abruptly because they realise the tax implications, there is no chance for succession planning.

Alex Chalk: The hon. Lady is making a good speech. It is true that senior consultants are often relatively well paid, but they cannot afford sometimes four, five or six-figure tax bills suddenly arriving on their doormats, which provide the most profound disincentive to their doing what they want to do: care for patients.

Ruth Jones: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, and much more eloquently than I could. These things are coming in at the end of people's working lives, and it is difficult for people to budget for them when they do not know what will land on the doormat. When we enter working life and take on board pensions, we know what we are signing up to. These changes are being made in the latter stages of people's working lives, so it is really difficult to budget and plan for them.

Several constituents who work at the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board in my constituency have written to me to say that they will finish work early or cut down on the number of sessions because of these punitive tax bills. Although obviously the health service in Wales is devolved, pensions are not, so it is important that we look at this issue in the round and across the UK. We need to make sure that we retain these doctors across the board.

I commend the hon. Member for Poole for introducing the debate. I ask the Government to look again at this situation.

9.46 am

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I add my congratulations to my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms), on securing the debate, kicking things off and so clearly setting out the challenge that we face. In recent weeks, we have worked as a tag team between Winchester and Poole—earlier this month I raised the issue in the Chamber during an urgent question on the NHS people plan, which is a logical place for the subject to sit, and he, obviously, is leading the debate today—and that is entirely appropriate given that we are relatively near constituency neighbours and that many of our constituents work in Winchester, Bournemouth, Poole and Southampton NHS trusts and do shared work across those trusts.

I must say that the debate should be responded to by a Minister from Her Majesty's Treasury. That is no criticism of the excellent hospitals and workforce Minister, who until very recently I was honoured to call a ministerial colleague in the Department of Health and Social Care. This is the first debate being responded to by a Minister from the Department of Health and Social Care that I have spoken in since I left office. However, seeing as we have a Health and Social Care Minister here, I will focus my remarks on patient care, which my hon. Friend the Member for Poole has discussed.

Over the past few weeks, I have spoken on a number of occasions to the chief executive of Hampshire Hospitals NHS Trust, Alex Whitfield, and I have spoken either through her or directly to numerous consultants and senior clinicians about this challenge. I am aware how serious it is, both for the individuals adversely affected—as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones)—and for patient care and wellbeing, because the NHS is about its people if it is anything.

When I first spoke to my local trust about this, the chief executive told me that

“the pension situation is having a significant impact on our people”

in Winchester and Basingstoke, and:

“The NHS scheme is particularly affected by changes to the pension tax system relating to the Annual Allowance and the Life Time Allowance.”

She is not wrong when she says:

“These changes are complicated and for individuals in the NHS defined benefit pension scheme the implications are not at all transparent.”

That point was well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Poole. She says:

“As a result, individuals are receiving unexpected tax bills of tens of thousands of pounds. It particularly impacts on consultant doctors, senior nurses and managers. Individuals are making different decisions as a result of these bills.”

I will pause on that point, about the senior NHS staff on whom this is having an impact.

I was privileged to be part of a Department that, under the previous Secretary of State, who is now the Foreign Secretary, and under the current Secretary of State, has delivered a record funding settlement for the NHS—£20.5 billion a year. I saw that play out in Winchester a few weeks ago, when I opened the new emergency department of the Royal Hampshire County Hospital in the heart of the city. That is excellent news. In my opinion, the challenge for the NHS will not be too little money, as a result of the settlement and the excellent long-term plan, but having the right people, who can spend that money in the right way to deliver the patient care outcomes that we want. If we are losing senior people, we have a senior problem.

As well as speaking to the leadership at my local trust, I wanted to find out more from the horse's mouth, so I asked members of the local clinical community to come forward with their own stories and, if I may, I shall put a few of them on the record. One consultant set the scene very clearly. He told me that the issue is the annual allowance pension tax taper, which I will come back to, and the inflexibility of the NHS pension, which is landing consultants with huge tax bills for doing extra work on top of their contracted hours. The consultant

[*Steve Brine*]

was clear—and I agree, not least as a former Health Minister—that that extra work keeps the NHS running in the face of ever increasing demand.

I was told that, in certain circumstances, the marginal tax rate on earnings for the extra work is greater than 100%, which means that senior doctors working in my local hospital are in effect having to pay to do extra work. They are some of the most committed individuals in public service in our country, and I have had the privilege of working closely with many of them, but that is taking things a bit too far. It is clearly not a sustainable situation and, now that the huge tax bills are landing on doorsteps, it is causing a huge change in the behaviour of consultants at all levels in my local trust.

Another consultant told me that she has been an NHS doctor for 19 years and has worked as a consultant in my local trust for the last seven. She is employed on a full-time contract, with additional out-of-hours cover. Moreover, she regularly covers additional lists and shifts that require cover, sometimes at very short notice. She could not have been clearer with me that she is happy to provide that cover in the interest of safe patient care, which is of course what this is all about, as everyone has said. However, she has now been hit with a £30,000 tax bill, and she tells me that the only way she can avoid regular large tax charges, which may be for tens of thousands of pounds a year and which of course are in addition to her not insignificant income tax payments, is seriously to reduce the hours that she works for the NHS and not to take on any additional duties. As has been said, that goes to the heart of the issue. The consultant fears, as does her MP, that that is the conclusion that many of her colleagues will be forced to accept.

Let me again give some facts from trust level. Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust recently ran a survey on the pension issue and received a healthy 2,500 responses. It is the case that 42% of all the respondents have reduced their work commitment; 20% have avoided promotion; and, critically, when the people were asked who might change working practices in the future, the figure goes up to 80%, including 33% considering early retirement and just over a quarter considering leaving the NHS altogether.

I have no doubt that the changes were introduced in good faith. They are aimed at top rate earners, as my hon. Friend the Member for Poole said, but in practice this has had a damaging effect on key people in the NHS, and if it is not sorted quickly, we will see that escalate further, and it will become harder and harder to retrieve the position. The suggestions put to me for fixing it include removing the annual allowance tapering. When I spoke during the urgent question earlier this month, a number of consultants from across my local trust and Poole and Southampton contacted me. They are pleased that the consultation, which I am sure my hon. Friend the Minister will say more about, is imminent, but what they fear from that is that the 50:50 fudge will just not work. We need wholesale reform, and the taper really does need to be scrapped.

In addition, I ask the Minister whether it is worth considering removal of the annual allowance taper for public sector workers. Of course, that is a decision not for him but for the Treasury and for whoever is inhabiting

No. 10 in a few weeks' time—I may be well placed to influence that, or I may be not at all placed. The point is this. If we want to make the NHS a great place to work, why not provide a tax benefit to working for the public sector—one of the biggest employers in the world? That is food for thought.

Let me finish in the same way as I have tried to make the whole of my contribution this morning—with a real-life example from Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust of what we are seeing at trust level. In Winchester, like everywhere else and as I have set out, the Royal Hampshire County Hospital, one of the three hospitals in the trust, relies on many doctors and other senior staff doing additional sessions over and above their timetabled work in order to fill gaps in the medical workforce. Locally, we have seen that especially in radiology, where the additional sessions are used for radiologists to review scans and write the reports about what they see. The reporting of scans is clearly required so that patients can be told what the scan shows and clinical staff can work with patients on the most appropriate treatment.

My good friend from the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), whom we will hear from shortly, and I spent many hours in this Chamber when I was the Minister with responsibility for cancer, and I was extremely proud to get the 75% stage 1 or 2 diagnosis ambition into the long-term plan, as announced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. That is critical: early diagnosis is cancer's magic key, as has been said by me and others many times in this Chamber. If we are to get anywhere near realising that ambition, we have to have a functioning, improved and expanded radiology service. Any reduction in radiology and the diagnosis stage will have an adverse impact and make that ambition unattainable, in my opinion. I am reliably told by my local trust that it has seen the backlog of scans waiting to be reported growing each week over the last few months. That concerns me greatly. It is of course just one department—it is an area that I know a little about—but it is a sobering example and one that we simply cannot ignore.

I shall finish by saying that we must act. I have so much respect for this Minister, but we need the Treasury to take this issue seriously and we need the next Prime Minister to act. If we do not, it will only get worse. We need to grip it, and we need to grip it fast.

James Gray (in the Chair): Despite his late arrival to the debate, I call Mr Paul Sweeney.

9.57 am

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Gray, for your kindness in letting me participate in the debate. It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I apologise for my late arrival.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms) on securing the debate, and the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) on also trying to press the Government on this matter. I have come to the debate because two consultants in my constituency came to me about this issue and I thought it important to communicate their views directly to the Minister. I hope that actions can be taken, because this is clearly a classic case of the law of unintended consequences.

One of those constituents, Dr Urquhart—the other was Dr Hepburn—wrote to me. Dr Urquhart has been a consultant in the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde area for nine years and is employed on a 48-hours-per-week, full-time contract, which includes being on call. He says that, following this change,

“I will have to drop the number of hours per week I work and also not take on any extra shifts which are paid...to cover rota gaps and waiting list initiatives which reduce the penalty to NHS GGC for waiting list breaches.”

In a sense, the change is penalising the efficiency of the NHS and introducing further costs to the health service that could be avoided. The consultant continues:

“Due to reduction in annual allowance for pension growth, the introduction of the tapering of the annual allowance coupled with the introduction of the 2015 NHS pension scheme, a growing number of doctors are facing four, five and six figure tax bills on top of their income tax and national insurance contributions. In my case this means that in the next year I expect a huge tax bill as in October 2018 I received a 10 year pay rise and will receive a large tax bill.”

He believes that it will impact on all consultants in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and beyond.

It appears that the only way in which Dr Urquhart can avoid these large regular tax charges, which may amount to tens of thousands of pounds a year in addition to his income tax payments, is to reduce the hours that he works for the national health service. He fears that many of his colleagues will be forced to accept the same conclusion. He and his colleagues often go above and beyond to ensure that services can continue running safely and effectively, but there are limits to what can be reasonably expected of even the most dedicated doctors.

As a result of the current pension and tax regime, Dr Urquhart is effectively paying to provide additional services to the national health service. He hopes that these separate changes to tax and pension arrangements were an unintended consequence that was not appreciated when they were first introduced, that the resultant negative effects on the NHS workforce were unintended, and that the Treasury will undertake to correct them. Like many services, his department relies on consultants working regular overtime through additional programmed activities.

Unless the Government take action, many doctors like Dr Urquhart will be left with no option but to reduce their working hours significantly. Other consultants in the national health service in Glasgow are being advised to take early retirement to avoid these taxes. That will exacerbate an already acute workforce crisis in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and seriously jeopardise the sustainability of the national health service. The impact on Glasgow's Queen Elizabeth University Hospital—the largest medical facility in Europe—alone must not be understated. The topic is frequently discussed by his colleagues, many of whom feel the same.

I hope that the Minister will take cognisance of the issues raised by many consultants and the British Medical Association. Fundamental reform of the tax issue, particularly by scrapping the tapered annual allowance, is urgently required to prevent a workforce crisis. I hope that he will recognise the scale and immediacy of the risk to the national health service and that he will undertake to take our representations back to the Government and ensure that the problem is rectified as a matter of urgency.

10.1 am

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I declare an interest: I spent more than 30 years as a consultant in the NHS and am married to a GP, so naturally the issue affects us. However, it also affects many of our colleagues.

The first thing to hit was the lifetime tax allowance changes. In my husband's practice, I saw GPs being driven out at the age of about 57 or 58. They had had no intention of retiring early, but they had been warned in their annual meeting with their accountant that, because of the taper, they would suddenly reach a high marginal tax rate of well over 50%, which naturally is not very attractive. The result, exactly as other hon. Members have laid out, is that we are losing the people with the most expertise—the people who train the new people.

It is important that we do not get carried away into thinking that the NHS is about machinery, buildings or gizmos and gadgets. Every one of those gizmos and gadgets is used by a person. It is people in the NHS who care for, treat and diagnose people. If we do not have the workforce, all the waiting times that we like to stand up and talk about will be completely shot. The workforce issues that all four UK nations face are being made worse by these problems.

Many people may think, “A £1 million pension pot allowance? What a great problem to have!” It is a great problem, but the difficulty is that in general practice, GPs reach a high salary quite early, unlike in a hospital where becoming a consultant takes 15 or 16 years, so people have taken out added years and bought extra service. Because we graduate late, it ends up being very difficult to work for 40 years and have a half-salary pension. We thought about buying added years—we looked at it twice, but we could never afford it.

It is the same issue that arose with the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign and with Hewlett Packard, Magnox and all the others: people are expected to commit to a pension in their early 20s, but when they get to the other end, the goalposts have moved. It hits them when they can do nothing about it but bail out—and that is what they are doing.

The lifetime tax allowance limit has already driven out consultants and GPs before the age of 60, but what makes the problem much more acute is the tapering annual tax allowance. As we have heard, it was introduced in 2010 at more than £250,000 to avert tax avoidance and gaming of the system. Senior medics in the NHS are probably the highest-paid people who do not run a business. They are on pay-as-you-earn, so they cannot play the game of writing off this, that and the other or paying themselves in weird ways; they just get their payslip, and the tax is taken. They are not in the tax avoidance game that was perhaps thought of when the taper was introduced. The commercial sector is defined contribution, not defined benefit; it is how the limits interact with the NHS, and probably other public service schemes, that causes the problem.

The annual allowance was reduced to £50,000 in 2011 and then to £40,000 in 2014. For those caught by the taper, the allowance can go right down to £10,000. The threshold is £110,000—not £150,000, which was the impression that the Chancellor gave at Treasury questions on 21 May. People hit a cliff edge, as hon. Members have highlighted:

[*Dr Philippa Whitford*]

all of a sudden, they are caught in a system where they are taxed over and over on the same income. It particularly affects consultants, who are paid about £110,000 or more, and full-time GPs.

Those who have been caught out and hit by these bills are now talking to their colleagues. The result is that people are refusing promotion and refusing to take on the extra duties that are required in the NHS, such as becoming an education director, a manager of junior doctors or a clinical lead, because anything that could bring in extra income for extra work could suddenly push them over the threshold. Doctors cannot see in advance whether they will be hit, so they cannot manage things over the year.

Some of the bills that arrive have been absolutely horrendous. The average bill is £18,500, but many are getting towards £100,000. No one has that kind of amount lying around in their bank account, however much they are paid. Even trying to pay the bill has caused terrible problems. People are paying it either from already taxed income or by taking a loan on which they will have to pay interest—or they are using scheme pays, borrowing from their pension pot to pay off their bill and then having to pay the money back at non-commercial rates. That still reduces their final pension pot, because the money has technically not been in it for the same length of time.

Sir Robert Syms: A BMA consultant told me that an actuary has done some modelling and found that the penalties are so severe that somebody who works 48 hours a week and has to borrow money from their pot at the end will have a lower pension than someone who works 24 hours a week.

Dr Whitford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate and for making that point. I have not seen that actuarial working, but it highlights how completely bonkers the scheme is. People are trying not to do anything extra; they are doing everything to stay below the threshold, because once they are over it, they get sucked into a Kafkaesque spiral that pulls them down to ridiculous levels.

Another problem for GPs in England is that they are not getting their pension statements because of issues with the system; I think Capita runs it at the moment, and we know how well it runs some of the other services that it has been asked to manage. Non-pensionable income is counted, which seems very weird for pension tax allowances. The notional growth in someone's pension pot is also being counted as income. I am sorry, but income is income; it is what someone earns or receives, not what might be sitting in their pension pot for them to gain in 10 years. All these problems are catching doctors out, because they cannot see them. As they have begun to suffer, all they can do is ensure that they stay below the threshold.

The former junior Health Minister—the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), with whom I have spent many hours in this Chamber—highlighted the fact that 80% of people affected will change practice. That is leading people to refuse anything that will lift up their income—not only promotion and extra duties, but extra sessions. Many of those who are in their early to

mid-50s are talking about retiring, which would be cataclysmic. The survey that he mentioned shows that some 30% are already considering doing so.

Between six and seven years ago, we were suddenly hit with a doubling of our pension contributions—from about 6% to about 14%—which meant that my take-home pay went down. Here we are, six or seven years later, being punished because our pension pots are too big. It is completely bizarre.

The problem is that we cannot afford for those who are affected to retire. Every time we discuss workforce, we talk about recruitment and retention. These people are the ones who will train the new recruits, and we need to hold on to them. As has been mentioned, the measure is not devolved but its impact is devolved in health. Only this place can sort out the pensions mess.

I am really disappointed that we do not have a Treasury Minister listening to this debate, and I hope that at some point we will have a debate to which a Treasury Minister responds. The Minister for Health, who is here today, will have to gather our comments and take them to the Treasury, and we would rather communicate directly with the Treasury. This issue has to be sorted, or there will be an absolute workforce meltdown within the next two years.

10.10 am

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms) on securing this important debate, and I underline the fact that I am a shadow Treasury Minister responding on behalf of the Opposition.

We are here today to discuss the impact of changes to allowances on tax relief on pensions specifically in regard to NHS pensions. As people in this Chamber will know, in 2016-17, an estimated £38.6 billion in tax relief was provided on contributions to approved pension schemes; obviously that is the overall figure and does not cover just those who work for the NHS. It is a very substantial amount of relief.

As I am sure Members will also know, the last Labour Government introduced the annual allowance and lifetime allowance back in 2006. The annual allowance was initially set at £215,000 and the lifetime allowance at £1.5 million. Since then, as other Members have discussed, we have seen gradual reductions. Under the coalition Government and the Conservative Government, the lifetime allowance was reduced from £1.8 million to £1.5 million in April 2012, then to £1.25 million in 2014, and to £1 million in April 2016. It has actually floated up a little bit with inflation up to 2019-20, when it will be—as has been mentioned—£1,055,000. There has been a similar trend with the annual allowance, which was reduced from £255,000 to £50,000 in April 2011 and it then went right down to £40,000 in 2014.

Of course, the particular changes that we have focused on today are around the interaction of all of these measures with the taper, which George Osborne introduced in the summer Budget of 2015. From April 2016, the annual allowance would be tapered at a rate of £1 for every £2 of taxable income, including pension benefits and not subtracting employee pension contributions, received over £150,000 in adjusted income, going right down to £10,000 for those with an income of more than £210,000. As has also been mentioned, that final change

affects those people whose pay is more than £110,000 a year, excluding pension benefits and employee pension contributions, and who see an increase in their pension benefits of more than £40,000 in a given year.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) said, and the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) underlined, all that obviously amounts to a considerable number of changes in a very short time. So we have seen the tax treatment of pensions for all high-paid workers changing very substantially, indeed in a way that they probably could not have envisaged when they first joined their pension scheme. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire was right to indicate the parallels between this situation and what has happened to several other groups of taxpayers.

I see that the Minister is kindly scribbling things down at the moment. I hope that he will pass on to his Treasury colleagues that it is simply unacceptable if, at the very least, these taxpayers do not receive adequate information about what their liabilities will be. I was deeply concerned to hear from the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire that, for example, people are not receiving their pension statements. Surely that is the very minimum that is required.

On principle, it is surely necessary for the pension allowance to decline gradually for those people who earn very high incomes. It is fair, and consistent with other core principles of our tax system, that tax charge exemptions should be reduced for people who have very high incomes. However, there is of course the issue about the interaction of that system with other pension schemes, especially the NHS pension scheme, and given the fact that we have a very tight labour market for those in the NHS with substantial expertise. As has been mentioned, about 30% of doctors earn £110,000 or more, and nearly 10% earn more than £150,000. Clearly, this group of staff are the people who have the necessary expertise, as has also been mentioned a number of times.

I am aware of course that official representations have been made on this issue. We have heard what has been stated by the British Medical Association and the British Dental Association, and I think that the polling to which the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) referred was very interesting in that regard. It was also helpful to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) about the impression that he received from his local NHS trust about what is going on.

When we consider this issue, it is very important that we do not just talk about tax treatment; we must also consider how it inter-relates with what is a very complex NHS pension scheme, one that, as I understand it, was not fully consulted on with representative organisations when it was introduced.

As has been mentioned, we now have three different schemes, and my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West indicated how working out how these schemes relate to each other and how that will impact on tax outcomes is very difficult for individuals. As the hon. Member for Poole rightly said, the impact of these changes—related to this combined test of both the threshold and the annual income, plus the taper—makes it very difficult for individuals to work out what their liability is without any kind of professional help. Of course, that professional help is also expensive.

We need to look at NHS pensions, and I hope that it will be possible for the Minister to take that issue away and discuss it with his Treasury colleagues. However, I will just say to those in this Chamber that, as well as talking about the problems for high-paid NHS staff, we of course also need to look at the issues for low-paid NHS staff. The pension situation is quite concerning for them. The annual report on retirement by Scottish Widows indicated that overall one in five young people are saving nothing for their later life, and many of those people who are working in our NHS on low pay have opted out of pension schemes, because they feel that they need the cash now to make sure that they can make ends meet.

A freedom of information inquiry in 2018 found that more than 245,000 workers from across the NHS in England had opted out of the NHS pension scheme in the previous three years. A lot of those were low-paid workers, so that is enormously concerning. Although I agreed with much of what the hon. Member for Winchester said, I do not agree with him that the levels of resource currently being considered by his Government will be adequate in the future.

Let us consider the current situation. We obviously have the cumulative impact of the pay cap over many years. The Government finally saw sense on that, but it took them a long time to do so. There are also groaning waiting lists, extended waits for accident and emergency, and the rationing of NHS services, with many procedures no longer being offered by the NHS. Until we see a change in that situation, it will be difficult for many of us to argue that the NHS is heading in the right direction resource-wise.

I know that the Government have made a commitment to improve funding in the future, but the Opposition continue to believe that that commitment is not sufficient.

Steve Brine: My point was that the NHS long-term plan has been significantly funded, with record funding, which, for the record—seeing as the hon. Lady has gone there—is significantly more than was promised by the Opposition. Yes, other resources will be required, around public health for instance, and around the people plan, but perhaps the hon. Lady can tell us what Labour's fiscal promise is to the NHS, and how it will be paid for.

Anneliese Dodds: Absolutely. I am grateful to the—

James Gray (in the Chair): Obviously, in the context of the debate.

Anneliese Dodds: Great. I will keep it within the context of the debate as much as possible, because in fact this debate is around taxation—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady will not keep it within the context of the debate “as much as possible”; she will keep it within the context of the debate.

Anneliese Dodds: I certainly will, Mr Gray. Thank you.

As I was saying, this debate is broadly around the contours of the taxation system and how they affect high-paid workers in particular. I am sure that the hon. Member for Winchester is aware that Labour has a different approach from that of the current Government around progressive taxation. We set out our proposals at the last general election: we indicated how, by increasing

[Anneliese Dodds]

the tax paid by the very best-paid workers, we would free up the resources that are necessary. I am sure that he has seen what Labour produced in that regard—in particular, we would not pay for the boost in spending that the NHS needs only through a short-term windfall, which in practice is what the Chancellor did, because all the commitments that the Government made to the NHS were as a result of lower than projected spending and higher than projected taxation receipts.

That is not a sustainable way to fund our NHS in the long run. Instead, we should look at the longer-term measures that are necessary, which is exactly what we have been doing.

We need to ensure that NHS workers on lower incomes can save properly for retirement, but we also need to look at the situation that has been the focus of today's debate. We need to focus on the changes that were made in the 2015 pension scheme, and how they interact with the variety of alterations that have been made to tax release. It is especially important to do so in the context of staff retention, and I understand the comments that Members have made about that topic. We have a particular problem with NHS staff leaving their jobs early, which in my experience is not merely because of these issues, although of course they are important. When I talk to senior staff in the NHS, they also mention stress, a general lack of resource, having to deal with short-term changes such as operating theatres being closed because of a lack of staff, and so on. A whole variety of features is driving those retention problems.

Dr Whitford: I accept that there are many other issues, and obviously all four UK health systems are stretched because workforce is their No. 1 issue, but this problem comes on top of that. People who feel stretched—people who feel they have a terrible work-life balance, who are working late and so on—suddenly find that the extra sessions they do are costing them money. That is a final slap in the face.

Anneliese Dodds: I am aware of that; for many, this issue can be the straw that breaks the camel's back, especially when it is not anticipated.

I hope that the Government will look carefully at the impact of threshold effects, particularly cliff edges that lead to radical changes in the amount of tax paid, which is a significant problem with the UK tax system generally. The situation for incurring VAT is analogous to this one: small businesses are deliberately staying below the threshold because as soon as they go over it, they have to start paying VAT—not necessarily at a very high rate, but with all the bureaucracy and so on that comes with it. This situation is very similar: there is that cliff edge, where tax treatment suddenly becomes very different from what it was before.

In the long run, Government should aspire to learn from the best of what happens in other countries that have a more granular approach; where income is more tightly tied—and sometimes entirely tied—to tax treatment, so that as one's income goes up, tax liability goes up stepwise. That seems a very sensible approach, but of course, getting there is a long-term aspiration. In the short term, I hope that the Minister—who I know is an open-minded person—will ask his Treasury colleagues to sit down with the experts and representative organisations,

and talk to them about how these problems arise because of the interaction of the complex pension system with the complex treatment of tax release, so that there can be some kind of short-term fix with a view to, in the long term, having a much more rational approach to tax release on pension contributions.

10.23 am

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): As ever, Mr Gray, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair for this important debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms) on securing it. It is a topic that the House has previously considered, when my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) introduced a debate on the matter.

Colleagues should be reassured that the Government have been listening carefully to senior doctors and their employers. We recognise the actions clinicians are taking in response to their concerns about, and experience of, the annual allowance tax charges and how they are affecting frontline services. My hon. Friend the Member for Poole is right: although we are talking about tax changes for consultants, clinicians and GPs, the reason why this is so serious is that ultimately, if we do not get it right, it impacts on the quality of patient care. We all share that ambition to get it right.

Mr Sweeney: The Minister says that the tax changes are likely to have an impact on patient care. They are already having an impact; my constituent has said that he is seeing anaesthetic cancellations on theatre lists at his hospital in Glasgow, which have never been seen before in the NHS. He has had to resign as a foundation programme director, supervising junior doctors, to reduce the number of paid hours he does.

Stephen Hammond: Let me make it clear that not only are the changes having an impact, they are likely to continue to have an impact. I recognise that; the hon. Gentleman will hear later in my remarks that we recognise that point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poole was right to talk about the long-term plan and the cash settlement that goes with it. He was also right, though, to mention that any plan will work only if it works: if we make sure the people delivering it can do so with the numbers and experience required. The hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), although she said she was not expecting to speak this morning, made a thoughtful speech and raised a number of issues from her direct experience that informed the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) represents the place where I was born and spent my childhood, so for that and other reasons, I always listen carefully to what he says. He was right to stress at the start of his speech that this is not about tax breaks for particular people, although that is the headline; the reality is that perverse disincentives are being created against providing the care that we need. I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), who has just intervened on me to reiterate the point he made in his speech about the experiences of some consultants, and I recognise that those experiences are not unique to Glasgow North East.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) always makes many informed remarks, given her experience. She made a point that perhaps has not been picked up,

but is important in informing the debate: this is not just about losing a number of potential outpatient appointments and clinicians to service them, but about the impact on training. In many of the places that I have had the honour to visit as Health Minister, it is clear that the mentoring and support provided by senior staff to more junior staff is an important contribution, not only to the wellbeing of those junior staff, but to their education and, therefore, to the benefit of patients. That is undoubtedly one of the consequences of what we are talking about today.

Dr Whitford: Obviously, senior clinicians are critical to clinical teaching, which is part of the work. However, as other Members have highlighted, consultants are refusing to take on the extra sessions involved in organising that teaching and running rotas for either junior doctors or medical students. Without that, it will just be chaos.

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady is right to make that point; as I said in my remarks about her speech, I recognise the impact on training. There is clearly concern that unless we address this matter, it will have a number of impacts, of which that is one.

The hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), speaking for the Opposition, rightly opened her remarks by pointing out the scale of the cost of tax release for pensions to the Treasury. She made valid points about doctors' knowledge about that liability, and about the interaction of core tax principles with particular schemes. I was rather hoping that she would also welcome the long-term plan and the cash settlement, but I suspect that element of unity was probably a step too far.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Poole may have mentioned at the beginning of his speech, we have fewer Members here and a lower number of contributions. However, those contributions, combined with some of the interventions, have meant that we have had a debate of high quality.

Needless to say, I have heard the representations from everyone in the Chamber. It will not surprise anyone that I have received, as has the Department, representations from NHS employers reporting exactly what we have been discussing—that consultants are increasingly no longer willing to work additional sessions. The lost capacity is clearly difficult to replace, especially in some clinical areas where there are already shortages, and it can be expensive, as employers can pay a premium for locums to fill the gap. It is obvious and right that where there is evidence of an impact on the delivery of services, the Government should be prepared to take action.

At the outset, I reiterate that the Secretary of State and I take seriously the concerns of doctors. That is why we have been involved in a number of discussions with the Treasury, which has resulted in the 50:50 flexibility and the consultation. I will come to that in a moment, but, as Members will hear as I develop my remarks, that will not be the end of our conversation with other Departments.

Looking at the case for pension flexibility, it is true that outside public service, employers in some cases have flexibility to adjust benefit packages to allow high-earning employees to target a lower level of pension saving and so reduce the potential for large regular annual allowance tax charges. That flexibility is not currently present in the NHS. The NHS pension scheme does not allow any flexibility over the level of pension growth. Staff who participate in the scheme must pension all regular earnings

from their employment. The Government are right to take the view that it is important to ensure that staff have a good level of pension savings, but senior clinicians, particularly consultants and GPs, have a unique degree of flexibility over their workloads and obviously can reduce their commitments. Consultants can reduce the number of additional sessions undertaken, and many GPs are self-employed. That can create incentives for clinicians to seek to control their income and pension growth by limiting or reducing their NHS work to avoid breaching their annual allowance. As a number of Members have discussed, that clearly has an impact on the delivery of patient care.

It is clear that retaining and maximising the contribution of our highly-skilled clinical workforce is crucial to the NHS and the long-term plan for the NHS. While any pension tax regime should seek to achieve the fiscal ambition of distributing pension saving incentives fairly, it has to be recognised that, in combination with the fixed structure of the NHS pension scheme, that could produce—listening to the evidence today and the evidence I have directly received—unintended consequences for service capacity and the delivery of patient care. The Government are prepared to change the rules to give clinicians more flexibility.

Alongside the publication of the “Interim NHS People Plan” earlier this month, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced our intention to consult on new flexibility for clinicians. The consultation will be published in the coming days—I hope very shortly—and will set out proposals for a 50:50-style option, offering 50% pension accrual and halved contributions. Earlier this year, as part of the new five-year GP contract, the BMA and NHS England asked the Government to consider introducing that option. While I recognise that the BMA has not been unequivocal in its support, it has welcomed the proposal as a step in the right direction.

The Government believe that a 50:50 option balances the benefit of flexibility with the fiscal impact to the Exchequer. The 50:50 option will allow clinicians to build up their pensions more slowly and at a lower cost. Clinicians will still need to make their own personal assessment as to whether their financial interests are best served by taking advantage of the 50:50 model or continuing with full-rate accrual, but I have heard—not necessarily in the debate today, but directly from a number of consultants—that the 50:50 option is not flexible enough and that other measures should be considered.

The new pension flexibility should be viewed as a positive development for clinicians. My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester mentioned that he has asked me about the consultation period on the Floor of the House and that he has spoken to consultants about it. The consultation will be an opportunity to listen to a range of views before any final proposition is agreed. I encourage all Members here today to encourage their local clinicians to take part in that consultation. Equally, I encourage anyone from the health system in its widest context to take note of the debate and take part in the consultation. We want not only to hear any suggestion that there is a generic case for tax changes, but to listen carefully to what clinicians say using their own personal examples to provide evidence for any change they seek.

Steve Brine: Is the consultation discussing the merits or otherwise of a 50:50 option, or is it genuinely open to discussion about whether that option in itself is a

[*Steve Brine*]

good idea? As I said in my speech, the initial responses I have seen have not broadly welcomed, to put it politely, the idea of 50:50.

Stephen Hammond: The consultation is both. I recognise, as I said a few moments ago, that the 50:50 option has not received unequivocal support from the BMA, but to its great credit, it has asked us to consider that. We have come forward with this proposal. The BMA has welcomed it, but has said that it would want to discuss further options for flexibility and other pension matters. We have said that the consultation will look at the merits of the 50:50 option—or question it—but we will rightly open up that consultation to other suggestions. My hon. Friend will have just heard me say that I hope Members will encourage their local clinicians to use the consultation as a way of expressing their concerns about the 50:50, if they have any, and to express their views on other measures they would like to see introduced in terms of pension contributions. I stress that point again in response to his intervention. He will probably be interested in my next set of remarks, which are on flexibility.

Although the 50:50 option provides a new flexibility, we recognise that it does not provide unlimited flexibility for clinicians to target their own personalised level of pension growth and contributions. The financing model for the scheme means that any flexibility that reduces contribution income has an immediate fiscal impact on the Exchequer. The 50:50 option does not set aside the annual and lifetime allowance tax policies, but will give clinicians a new flexibility to manage their pension growth.

Where 50% accrual reduces pension growth by more than they wish, clinicians can use the contribution savings from the 50:50 model to buy additional pension to customise their own pension growth incrementally. Additional pension can be purchased in units of £250. That clearly adds some flexibility to their ability to manage their own contributions. However, some clinicians may continue to experience annual allowance tax changes, even with accrual rates reduced to 50%. For that group, while 50:50 reduces the charge, it does not eliminate it. We recognise that a number of individuals may wish to target a lower level of pensions growth. We will listen carefully to that suggestion through the consultation.

Dr Whitford: Is the Minister suggesting that senior consultants in three pension schemes sit and manage whether they are going to use the 50:50 or add in top-ups? That creates a whole job for people who work often 50 to 60 hours a week doing the thing that they are actually meant to do; it would give them almost a side job to try to manage their pension. Could we not go back to something simpler, whereby they get their payslip with a fair amount of pension tax taken off, but not what is happening at the moment?

Stephen Hammond: I have listened carefully to what the hon. Lady has just said, and she will want to listen to my next remarks, but I think she will reflect on the fact that a system of annual and lifetime allowances has been in place for some time. They were first introduced by the previous Government, although there have been some changes. Whether or not she thinks it would be better to have an even simpler system, some people will

have recognised over time that it is important to look at their own pension contributions. Although tax relief on pensions is one of the most expensive reliefs, and the NHS pension scheme is rightly one of the better schemes available, I absolutely recognise that annual allowances and negative tax rates have a huge impact on some clinicians and consequently on the services for patients.

Consultants have raised with me the issue of the tapered annual allowance that Members have spoken about. I have been asked why the taper threshold is currently set at £110,000, which cuts across, as many people have pointed out, the typical earnings of an NHS consultant, although some people might perceive £100,000 as a high level of income. Unsurprisingly, tax policy is not something that I can speak to, but I have asked the Treasury and it advises that the threshold income test is designed to ensure that only those on the highest incomes can be affected by the annual taper. In the Treasury's opinion, the £110,000 threshold balances the desire to restrict the annual allowance taper to those on the highest incomes, while trying to minimise the reduction in the value of the individual's annual allowance.

I have also been asked why the annual allowance taper calculation takes into account both pensionable and non-pensionable earnings. Again, with the obvious proviso that I cannot design tax policy, the Treasury advises that if non-pensionable pay is excluded from the annual allowance taper calculation, there is the possibility that an unscrupulous employer could reclassify some pay as non-pensionable. To ensure fairness, the Treasury includes all sources of income in the taper calculation. However, hon. Members will not be surprised to hear that I think the concern about unscrupulous employers is not one that applies to the NHS. I recognise the issues raised by hon. Members on behalf of their consultants with regard to the taper threshold, and I am grateful to the Treasury for the discussions we have had, which have resulted in the 50:50 flexibility, but I can assure hon. Members that that discussion has not concluded. We rightly recognise that other pension issues need to be resolved.

I am grateful that the Treasury continues to engage with concerns about the taper threshold and how it impacts upon the workforce. I am happy to assure hon. Members that the Department intends to continue having discussions so that the matter can have a resolution that we hope will sort the matter out in an equitable and fair way, and not only for tax principles. We want to ensure that the dedicated staff working in the NHS feel valued and understand that they will not be penalised through the creation of perverse incentives so that they do not do what we want them to do, which is to provide excellent patient care.

In closing, I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poole for raising this important issue. I hope that I have been able to do three things: first, show hon. Members that the Department and I as the Minister responsible for people in the health system recognise the concerns raised by hon. Members on behalf of their consultants. The issues have also been raised with me directly. Secondly, I hope people will recognise that the 50:50 option is an important first step in looking at issues associated with lifetime contributions. I urge hon. Members to encourage their consultants to use the consultation. Thirdly, I recognise there are still issues around the taper threshold and the annual allowance, and I give the Chamber a

commitment that the Department will continue to discuss with the Treasury ways in which we might be able to resolve those matters. I conclude by reiterating how important the debate has been this morning.

10.47 am

Sir Robert Syms: The lifetime allowance and the annual allowance have not created the crisis. The reduction in the limits has not created the crisis. If all we had at the moment was an annual allowance of £40,000, or a lifetime allowance of just over £1 million, the NHS would be living with that. What has caused the problem is the taper, and the taper's impact on the way in which people do their business. Initially, it is changing behaviour. If it is not fixed, it will do real damage to the NHS. I know the Department of Health understands that and I hope the Minister will make representations to the Treasury. If he gets moved and promoted soon, perhaps he will leave a note to his successor and send a note to the Treasury saying that unless they fix it soon, the cost of fixing it for taxpayers and for patients will be far higher. I thank everyone for contributing.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered NHS pensions, annual and lifetime allowances .

10.47 am

Sitting suspended.

Heated Tobacco

11 am

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government policy on heated tobacco.

May I say how pleased I am to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray? I immediately declare my interest as an honorary life fellow of Cancer Research UK.

Smoking remains a terrible public health problem in the United Kingdom. The Government recently referred to it as the “continuing tobacco epidemic”. It is the country's principal cause of cancer and single greatest cause of preventable illnesses and avoidable deaths. Some 7.4 million people in this country smoke, and smoking is the cause of around 100,000 deaths every year. There is a mistaken perception that the problem of smoking has largely been addressed, which might be because smoking, like many other societal ills, does not affect everyone equally. The smoking rate remains around 25% in many of the poorest areas of the country, whereas it is around 5% in more prosperous areas. In my constituency of Clwyd West, the rate is above the national average, at 17% to 18%.

The Government are to be commended for their achievements on smoking, and indeed for their ambitions for the future. Since 2010, Conservative-led Governments have brought the smoking rate down from 20.2% to 15.5%, which is a significant accomplishment. The Government are to be applauded for their ambition to lower smoking rates to 12% by 2020. Although they have not set yet a target date, the Government aim eventually to create a smoke-free generation, which they define as less than 5% of adults smoking. However, the challenge today is far greater than it was a decade ago, because smokers with a higher level of motivation to quit will have done so already. Those who remain have withstood years of public health campaigns and societal pressures, as well as the rise of e-cigarettes as an alternative to smoking.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on bringing this important matter to the House for consideration. Does he agree that advice must be provided first about smoking cessation, rather than about vaping or any other alternative method? Does he also agree that although there are no long-term indications of the effects of vaping, whether burned or heated, the chemicals that are used will not be neutral, and there will therefore always be an element of concern and a need for greater research?

Mr Jones: Clearly, the ideal is for people to give up smoking altogether, but there are ways of reducing it. I will go into that in my speech. The hon. Gentleman makes a point to which I shall also refer: there is a need for research on the effects of alternatives to combustible tobacco.

E-cigarettes have had a revolutionary effect on efforts to reduce smoking rates in this country, and credit must go to the Government for facilitating that. E-cigarettes have had a highly positive impact on helping smokers to quit. In 2010, a particularly enlightened member of the behavioural insights team, David Halpern, influenced the Government's decision not only to resist banning e-cigarettes—other countries were poised to do so—but

[Mr David Jones]

to seek deliberately to make them more widely available. David Halpern advanced the principle of harm reduction: it is more effective to give somebody a reduced risk product than to insist unrealistically on immediate total abstinence. An expert in harm reduction, Professor Gerry Stimson of Imperial College, has supported that argument, pointing out that it is easier to persuade people to do something if that thing is enjoyable rather than a painful chore. He said:

“For those trying to stop smoking, e-cigarettes have profoundly changed the experience. For the first time quitting cigarettes is no longer associated with being a ‘patient’ and personal struggle.”

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for securing this important debate. As a non-smoker, I think there is nothing worse than sitting outside a café in London or Shropshire and having my lungs full of somebody else’s smoke, or indeed trying to walk to Parliament and taking in a street full of smokers’ smoke. Having said that, I am a libertarian—if people want to smoke, they should be free to do so. His substantive point on public health education is absolutely right: the campaign against smoking is not over. In my constituency of The Wrekin, 19,000 people still smoke. Does he agree that public health is important?

Mr Jones: I do indeed. I will also comment on my hon. Friend’s point about other people having to endure smokers’ smoke. One point that the Government make in their response to the Science and Technology Committee’s report is that heated cigarettes are far less offensive to other people than combustible cigarettes.

Consumers’ principal reason for using e-cigarettes is to give up smoking. According to Action on Smoking and Health, 62% of ex-smokers use e-cigarettes for that purpose, and the majority of users have successfully quit smoking. However, it might well be that we have now passed the apogee of the e-cigarette effect. According to the Office for National Statistics, the number of new e-cigarette users peaked at 800,000 in 2013-14. Since then, the number has approximately halved every year, down to 100,000 in 2016-17. It is not the case that the remaining smokers do not want to quit; the ONS reports that nearly 60% do. For some, however, the experience of using e-cigarettes does not come sufficiently close to that of smoking to be an adequate substitute. In this context, I urge the Government to consider the alternatives.

In Japan, heated tobacco is proving very successful in helping smokers to quit. Evidence there shows that 70% of heated tobacco users give up smoking altogether. That is a better conversion rate than for any other alternative nicotine-containing product on the market.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I have been a smoke-free person for 15 years, but it took me 12 years to get there. I had various failed attempts to give up smoking because it was a choice between smoking and chewing gum, which really was not a successful pathway—it took me 12 years before I could finally give up. Any method that helps the process has to be a good idea.

Mr Jones: I am very pleased to hear that. Of course, it is debatable whether chewing gum is more or less antisocial than smoking—particularly in its effect on pavements.

The heated cigarette process uses an electronic device that heats tobacco, producing an aerosol that tastes like tobacco, and it delivers nicotine in a similar way to a cigarette. Importantly, however, it is not a product of combustion. Tests on heated tobacco carried out by the tobacco industry and scrutinised by the Committees on Toxicity, Mutagenicity and Carcinogenicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment found a reduction of up to 90% in the number of toxic chemicals emitted by heated tobacco compared with combustible cigarettes. That is not greatly dissimilar to Public Health England’s finding that e-cigarettes are up to 95% safer than combustible cigarettes.

Heated tobacco is currently sold in the UK, but there is no independent research to validate its use. Members of Parliament have said that research is needed, and the Government have agreed. As I mentioned a few moments ago, the Science and Technology Committee’s July 2018 report highlighted the need for independent research. It identified the opportunity for the Government to

“help fill remaining gaps in the evidence on the relative risks of e-cigarettes and heat-not-burn products”

and support a long-term research campaign that would be overseen by Public Health England and the Committee on Toxicity to ensure that health-related evidence is not dependent solely on the tobacco industry.

The Government’s December 2018 response to the report was favourable. They accepted the recommendation and undertook to

“review and consider where there are gaps in evidence for further independent research”.

They went on to say that they are

“committed to providing the outputs of research to the public on the risks of e-cigarettes and novel tobacco products.”

They also committed to including heated tobacco in their annual review of e-cigarettes. However, this year’s e-cigarette review contained no mention of heated tobacco.

We are falling behind our international peers on this front. The United States Food and Drug Administration recently produced research that concluded that heated tobacco is

“appropriate for the protection of the public health because, among several key considerations, the products contain fewer or lower levels of some toxins than combustible cigarettes.”

It reported up to 95% lower quantities of certain toxins.

My question to the Minister is this: will the Government commit to producing or supervising independent research into heated tobacco this year? We are talking about a matter of personal choice for smokers, but the Government have a duty to inform them about the available alternatives. We have seen the value of e-cigarettes in helping people to quit smoking, and if there is a prospect that heated tobacco could help to bring down smoking rates further, are we serving the interests of public health by not carrying out the promised research? Might not an approach akin to the innovation principle, as opposed to the precautionary principle, ultimately lead to fewer smokers? If it might, should we not, like David Halpern, seize the opportunity?

The research will not happen by itself. The responsibility to produce it lies with the Government, as they have acknowledged. From 1 July, we will be acknowledging heated tobacco in the tax system. Is not now an appropriate time for the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that the new tax category goes hand in hand with

independent research on the efficacy of heated tobacco in bringing down smoking rates and its impact on public health? It may be suggested that the lack of funding is an issue, but I urge the Government to consider requiring tobacco companies to pay for the research to be carried out, thereby circumventing the need to apportion departmental budgets to it.

The reduction of harm from smoking must remain a top priority for this and any other Government. I therefore hope that the Minister will respond positively to my suggestion.

11.12 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) for raising the important issue of heated tobacco products and their contribution to reducing harm from smoking, and for his lifelong service as a fellow of Cancer Research UK. He put it very well: smoking is still prevalent in certain communities in our country, and still causes over 78,000 deaths a year in England. It is one of the leading causes of preventable illness and premature death. We have made great progress, particularly over the past 10 years. Adult smoking prevalence is now 14.9%—the lowest ever recorded level—but, as he pointed out, we have much further to go, particularly among certain groups and in certain parts of the country.

In the 2017 tobacco control plan, we set out our ambition to reduce smoking and ensure a smoke-free generation. Part of that strategy is about helping people to stop smoking by adopting the use of less harmful nicotine products. They may, for example, take up chewing gum. I have never seen my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) spit out his gum on the pavement.

Mr Charles Walker: I quit 15 years ago, but it took me 12 years because the only choice besides smoking was nicotine gum, and it was simply revolting. I would have quit a lot earlier if we had some of these modern products around 15 years ago.

Seema Kennedy: I hear what my hon. Friend is saying. For a lot of people, nicotine substitutes are a good transition to giving up smoking or other things completely. We have seen a dramatic rise in the use of e-cigarettes from 1.6 million users in 2014 to about 2.5 million in 2017. Encouragingly, about half of them in England have quit smoking completely. E-cigarettes are not risk-free, however. The evidence is increasingly clear that they are significantly less harmful to health than smoking tobacco. They can help smokers to quit, particularly when combined with stop smoking services. Recent studies have shown they can be twice as effective as nicotine replacement therapy in helping people quit smoking. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West pointed out, the sales of e-cigarettes are plateauing, and we are coming to the stubborn 5% of people who are still smoking.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): The Minister will know that expenditure on smoking cessation programmes has fallen rapidly in the past few years. I promoted a ten-minute rule Bill to put a levy on tobacco companies to fund smoking cessation programmes and research into less harmful products. The greatest problem

we have had for many years—this is anecdotal at the moment—is that products such as patches and gums cannot get heavy smokers to quit. There is some evidence, although it is not firm, that heated products are a way of getting to people who have a real problem with addiction.

Seema Kennedy: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Those of us who represent seats in the north and the devolved nations know that in some communities a very high proportion of people—particularly older men—are still smoking. Smoking cessation services are obviously part of the conversation about public health that the Department will be taking forward to the spending review.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West has argued that it would be timely for the Government to commission independent research into heated tobacco products' potential for harm reduction. Obviously, if the tobacco companies were paying for it, it would not be independent. The right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) has set me an interesting challenge on tobacco levies. The new levy is being introduced in a few days, and I will definitely keep that under review.

The primary focus of our research at the moment is e-cigarettes, because heated tobacco is still very new on the market in this country. We will keep it under review and we will monitor the evidence through Public Health England's reviews. I agree entirely that it is important to look carefully at the evidence of harm reduction. I assure the House that we are, and will continue to be, led by that evidence.

Heated tobacco products are regulated under the Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016 as novel tobacco, in accordance with the EU's tobacco products directive. We know far more about e-cigarettes than we do about heated tobacco products. The research and evidence base is still in its infancy, and is mainly conducted by the tobacco industry. We asked the Committee on Toxicity to research the toxicological risks of heated tobacco products and compare them with those attributed to conventional cigarettes. It reported in December 2017, and the evidence suggests that heated tobacco products still pose a risk to users. There is likely to be a reduction in risk for cigarette smokers who switch to heated tobacco products, but quitting tobacco entirely is the most beneficial thing that anybody can do.

We have asked Public Health England to update the evidence base on e-cigarettes and other novel nicotine delivery systems annually. The PHE 2018 evidence review also had a comprehensive chapter on heated tobacco. It concluded the same as the Committee on Toxicity. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West said, it stated that e-cigarettes are less harmful than heated tobacco. The latest PHE evidence review in February 2019 did not cover heated tobacco products, essentially because there was insufficient new evidence since the previous review in 2018.

My right hon. Friend pointed to the experience of other countries. I agree that we must look beyond our shores and learn lessons, but we must also acknowledge that there are different contexts in which heated tobacco products are used. For example, Japan has banned e-cigarettes, but it has introduced heated tobacco products, which have made an impact there. The Food and Drug

[Seema Kennedy]

Administration in the United States has permitted the sale of heated tobacco products, but is yet to pronounce on whether Philip Morris International may make claims of reduced risk for its IQOS product. I believe, therefore, that we need to be cautious about assuming that heated tobacco products are likely to find a large market in the UK.

I recognise that more independent research on heated tobacco products would be helpful for understanding their relative risks. The Department and its arms' length bodies will consider research proposals in this field, but at present none has been forthcoming. I need to be clear that such proposals would need to demonstrate good use of public money. We will continue to monitor the international evidence and develop our policy as such evidence develops.

Mr David Jones: I have listened carefully to what the Minister has to say. It seems that the Government's position now is identical to their position six months ago, when they published their response to the report of the Science and Technology Committee. Is that right? Has nothing moved?

Seema Kennedy: There is a definite need for more research to be done on heated tobacco products. Only through proper, independent research can we draw different conclusions. However, my right hon. Friend has raised a very important issue about these products, which are helping certain people in this country and other jurisdictions to quit smoking. He has set me a challenge and I will certainly ask my officials to look closely at the issue.

It is important to remember that heated tobacco products are tobacco products, and we must apply suitable caution. Although switching from traditional cigarettes is likely to reduce risk, the best approach is to quit entirely. The Government remain committed to helping people quit smoking and promoting reduced-risk products where it makes sense for smokers. We will continue to be driven by the evidence.

Question put and agreed to.

11.22 am

Sitting suspended.

EU Structural Funds: Least Developed Regions

[SIOBHAIN McDONAGH *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered replacement of EU structural funds for least developed regions.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I am grateful that this issue has been selected for debate. I thank colleagues across parties and regions for supporting the application, particularly the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), who is not currently in her place, and my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley).

The application for this debate followed a report by the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions that crystallised concern that our regions should not lose out as a result of the decision made in the 2016 referendum. I intend to speak relatively briefly because I want to give plenty of opportunity to colleagues from across the regions to make their points. I have only one question for the Minister, but I will come to it at the end.

The CPMR report estimated that if the UK had remained in the European Union, we would have been entitled to €13 billion, or £11 billion, of support from EU structural funds—primarily the European regional development fund and the European social fund—during the next period, from 2021 to 2027. However, five regions would be set to receive a bigger share of that funding based on our position as having some of the poorest areas in Europe. Those areas are defined as “least developed regions” because our GDP falls below 75% of the European average. Clearly, that is not something that we should be proud of and it needs to be addressed.

Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, and west Wales and the valleys both already receive funding for that category.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that we have already contributed that money to the European Union and are getting it back?

Paul Blomfield: I agree. The European Union has demonstrated itself to be a very effective redistributive mechanism, taking from richer areas and redistributing to poorer ones. In my area of South Yorkshire, I imagine that we are a net beneficiary of that, although the UK as a whole is a net contributor.

Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly and west Wales and the valleys are already recipients of funding for that category, but have been joined by Tees Valley and Durham, Lincolnshire and my own region of South Yorkshire, because those three regions have now sunk below the 75% threshold, too.

In preparing for the debate, I consulted the House of Commons Library, which, as ever, provided excellent independent assessment and support—I commend those in the Library for the work that they always do for us—and confirmed the CPMR analysis. The Library

said that, if anything, the CPMR report underestimated the position because it had not taken account of southern Scotland, which would have been eligible, and added that “the ‘Outer London – East and North East’ region is also on the borderline”

for classification for support. The amount of funding for which UK regions could have been eligible may have been even higher than in the CPMR analysis.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): I will raise a point about the CPMR analysis that I was going to make during my speech, because it is hugely important to the hon. Gentleman’s argument. I saw a copy of the House of Commons Library briefing, which confirmed that the analysis said that some areas could see funding rise by 22%, but, as I am sure he knows, the European Union has said that it does not want funding to go up by more than 8% in relevant areas. I do not think that the Library covered that. That would be worth expanding on as the hon. Gentleman develops his argument.

Paul Blomfield: I will mention the 22% increase specifically as I proceed.

I am delighted that Members from across the regions that would have benefited are in the Chamber. Everybody will want to focus on the impact in their own areas but, as the Minister indicated, the projections indicate that the UK would be entitled to an increase of 22% in funding. I am sure that if we were a participating member, we would be arguing strongly to ensure that that assessment was matched in reality and that the funding came through.

The funding estimate is up from the €10.6 billion that we received from 2014 to 2020 to approximately €13 billion. Part of the reason that the CPMR estimates that increase is that we would now have five less developed regions, compared with two during the current funding period. The analysis states:

“All five of these regions would stand to receive EU support in excess of 500 euros per capita for the seven-year period.”

On current figures, that would result in £605 million for South Yorkshire to support economic growth.

There is a sense of déjà vu, because South Yorkshire has been here before. When the Thatcher Government decimated our coal and steel industries, and our whole economic base with them, we became one of the poorest regions in Europe. The EU stepped in with funding that was critical to rebuilding our economy, funding projects decided by local politicians and delivered by local bodies.

We received £820 million of objective 1 funding—levering in matched funding—which was channelled into more than 250 organisations and 650 projects. That encouraged investment, stimulated the development of new growth and high-technology sectors, helped businesses to modernise and become more competitive, supported innovation, helped with the commercialisation of research, developed skills and provided infrastructure in the region. We saw real transformation in a variety of ways.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. In his calculations, has he taken into account any potential and likely changes towards the end of the seven-year period? With yet more additions to the EU of companies

that would be net beneficiaries, the funding structure would change for the UK and other countries that happened to be part of the EU at the time.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but that is not part of the CPMR analysis, nor has the House of Commons Library suggested that it is a factor that should be taken into account.

In South Yorkshire, we saw real transformation. The advanced manufacturing park at Waverley—a partnership led by University of Sheffield with Boeing and Rolls-Royce—was held up by the Government as a flagship of growth through innovation. It was dependent on that funding and would not have got off the ground without it. That is just one example of the work in developing clusters, alongside advanced manufacturing and metals, investment in bioscience, creative and digital industries and environmental and energy technologies.

The funding was involved in the remodelling of the primary gateway to Sheffield in my constituency, by developing the station and the main pedestrian route into the heart of the city, and played a key role in making the city a more attractive place in which to invest. There was improved access to finance for small and medium-sized enterprises, which supported start-ups, scale-ups and incubator units such as the Quadrant Business Centre. Community projects in my constituency, such as Matrec and Zest, were funded for programmes to build the skills needed in a changing work environment.

Across South Yorkshire, there was investment in new roads and transport infrastructure.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): In Blaenau Gwent, the structural funds have made a big difference, particularly for transport, with the dualling of the heads of the valleys road. However, there is still bags to do, such as improving the Ebbw Vale train line to get more services to Cardiff. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister needs to confirm how much funding will be available and by when, particularly in advance of the spending review, so that we can get not only better trains from Ebbw Vale to Cardiff, but a boost to the local economies of our regions?

Paul Blomfield: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, in particular about investment in transport infrastructure. Without that, the wider area of my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) would have seen none of the road network in the Dearne valley that facilitated growth, with a whole series of new companies and the new jobs to go with them. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) is also right—he pre-empted my final question—to say that we need exactly that assurance from the Minister.

In South Yorkshire, the objective 1 funding worked: our economy grew by 8.5%. However, regional inequality has soared again since 2010. We are back in the same situation, qualifying as a least developed region and eligible for the highest level of EU funding had we been continuing as a member.

I know that the regional disparities concern both sides of the Chamber. Inner London is, unsurprisingly, our richest region, with GDP at 614% of the EU average—though I recognise that in London, too, there are pockets of deep poverty—but that figure falls to 69% for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. London is obviously represented overwhelmingly by colleagues from

[Paul Blomfield]

my party, but Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly by the Conservative party—this debate is about a fair deal for all our regions and about rebalancing our economy.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Given those regional imbalances and the question of how funding should be spent, is it not completely outrageous and unacceptable that we were promised a consultation on the shape of the shared prosperity fund, which should have started in late 2018, but have still not had one? My colleagues and I on the all-party parliamentary group for post-Brexit funding for nations, regions and local areas are sensing that there will not be a consultation before the comprehensive spending review. Does he share my view that that is completely unacceptable? Will he ask the Minister to confirm that he too thinks it is completely unacceptable?

Paul Blomfield: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. A feature of the wider debate on Brexit is that so many critical issues that will shape the outcome—structural funds, immigration and others—are just being kicked down the road. I hope that the Minister will respond directly to my hon. Friend's point.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): In Wales, our wages are 70% of the UK average and we receive something like £440 per person in structural funding. Is my hon. Friend aware that with a new plan, we will lose some of that, and that in the case of a new deal, we will have no money at all? Only today, I was talking to representatives of the Swansea universities who said that they were shedding hundreds of jobs. The background to that is the doubling in size of Swansea University thanks to EU money. We are in a critical place in Wales, with closures at Bridgend, Tata and Airbus because of Brexit, so the structural funding is imperative.

Paul Blomfield: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the impact on all our areas if there is not adequate investment in economic development.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): On the shared prosperity fund, a recent report by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee called for consultations to begin before the end of April. The Government response simply stated that

“the Government will consult widely on the Fund and final decisions are due to be made following the Spending Review”, and that

“the Government continues to review our approach to consulting on the Fund accordingly.”

That is not very definite. At some point, we will also need to ask the Minister what, if there were no spending review—which there probably will not be, or at least not a four-year one—that would do to consultations on sorting out the shared prosperity fund.

Paul Blomfield: That intervention clearly comes with the great knowledge and experience that my hon. Friend brings as Chair of the Select Committee. I hope that the Minister will pay attention to his concerns in the closing remarks.

I do not necessarily have a lot of confidence in that. I wrote to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government back in February, bringing the CPMR report to his attention and reminding him of the Government's commitment that regions should not lose out as a result of Brexit. I called on him to commit to providing the equivalent funding to what we would have received had we remained members of the EU. The Minister responded on the Secretary of State's behalf, but did not make that commitment. I asked the Minister that same question again in May during the Westminster Hall debate on the shared prosperity fund led by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central. The Minister again did not make that commitment.

Our experience is that where the Government have the opportunity, they shift funding from areas in need to other parts of the country. We have seen that markedly with local government. I therefore simply do not have the confidence that the Government will do the right thing by areas such as ours. In conclusion, I will ask the Minister again, the simple and central question of the entire debate. We were told that there would be no losers as a result of leaving the European Union. Indeed, I pressed that with David Cameron at Prime Minister's questions in the week after the referendum result. Had we remained a member, South Yorkshire would have received £605 million between 2021 and 2027; other regions would have received comparable amounts. Therefore, will the Government commit to providing, from whatever source, regional development funding at least equivalent to the money that we would have received from the European Union?

Several hon. Members rose—

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. All Members can see that there is an awful lot of interest in the debate. I understand that it is important to lots of Members' constituencies, so I ask you to work with me, and I apologise for imposing a limit of four minutes on each speech so that we ensure that everyone may speak on behalf of their constituents.

2.46 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I will refer to the Select Committee report which looked at a number of issues to do with local government and Brexit. I have a particular constituency interest as well, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), with the advanced manufacturing park and research centre, which has done so much reinvigorate and stimulate high-tech engineering and steel in the Sheffield city region. Yes, that is down to the University of Sheffield, Professor Keith Ridgway and my former colleague Richard Caborn, but it would not have happened without EU funding. We need to be conscious of that.

The Select Committee report was clear. It said to the Government that we need to get on and to consult now about the shared prosperity fund, what it should look like and how the money might be distributed. I understand that the Chancellor may not want to commit to an absolute total of money until after the spending review, or what passes for it—I am sure that the Minister, when he responds, will update us on whether we are to have a spending review—but why can we not have a consultation on the fund details? What is holding the Government up?

The Government have known about this for a long time, and they promised a consultation before the end of last year. A simple matter of at least talking to local government about how the fund will be distributed and what the criteria will be would be a start. People might then have some understanding and a conviction that the fund would happen. Why can that not be done? Why do we have to wait until later? The Government response to the Committee's report includes no real explanation but simply states that they "will consult widely" on the shared prosperity fund and that "final decisions" will be made "following the Spending Review", as I quoted earlier.

Why can the consultation not begin now? It is not sufficient for the Government to say that they are reviewing their approach on consulting. Why have we only got that far? It is in no way sufficient. Ministers should tell us what is holding the consultation up. We know that the Department has a big tray of things to do—the social care Green Paper, the social housing Green Paper, fracking, and the devolution framework which we have not yet seen—so Ministers are obviously busy thinking about doing things in the future, but why can we not get on and at least start to do something? That consultation would be an extremely good start. That is an important point, which needed to be made.

Another important issue we need further clarity on sometimes gets overlooked: we will no longer be a member of the European Investment Bank, which has provided funding for many important infrastructure projects. Again, the Government say that they want to explore options for future relationships with the EIB and for the arrangements to be put in place for local authority funding of future infrastructure projects. Why can those discussions with local authorities not begin now? Why do we have to wait? That is a simple ask. It may seem a long way away, but local authorities that are looking to start long-term infrastructure projects in 2021 need to start planning now. That is why the Government need to start consulting about how those projects will be funded.

2.50 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I am glad to have the opportunity to speak in this interesting and important debate. The six Cornish MPs went to the Treasury some time ago to set out why it was so important to address the issue properly. It is absolutely right that when we get the consultation, we use the expertise available to make sure it is done correctly.

I want to be clear that in Cornwall and on Scilly we are looking not for a handout, but for a hand up. The aim of European funding is to reduce inequalities between communities and reduce disparities in regional levels of development, with particular regard to those that have increased deprivation, rural and island areas, areas affected by industrial transition and regions that suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps. Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly fit perfectly with those aims. There is no reason not to see ourselves as benefiting from funding.

The seven least developed areas have set some priorities. The most sensible one, I think, is for an ambitious regional policy for England and Wales that recognises the need for a specific mechanism for the regions that are furthest behind. We want a protected allocation of

funds to such regions that will allow a genuine rebalancing of the UK economy. I have heard nothing from the Treasury or the Minister to suggest that is not their intention.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. The modern industrial strategy clearly commits to making sure that regions can play their full part, so no region is left behind. The allocated funding would not only improve the lives of people in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, but enable the region to contribute to national well-being.

Derek Thomas: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I say, we have heard nothing yet to suggest that the economy in Cornwall and on Scilly could not thrive. It is really important to MPs in Cornwall that we are part of the solution, not the problem. In July last year I set up a group that works with local business, Cornwall Council and people who already work with the most deprived and left behind in our communities. The group looks at the skills that a shared prosperity fund should deliver to enable people to get the well-paid, skilled jobs they want. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), attended the first meeting and set out a Government commitment and invitation for us to engage in the process and help them to understand what was needed.

Outside this building today there are thousands of people demanding that we take urgent action on climate change, clean up our air and make our society healthier and fairer. Through the shared prosperity fund we can achieve exactly that, particularly in places such as Cornwall. The Committee on Climate Change recommendations set out the need for massive upskilling to give people the skills needed for research and innovation, so that we can decarbonise our environment and our economy and ensure that people are healthier, live in healthier homes and have better opportunities. Now is the right time to have this debate and create a vibrant, low-carbon economy with better health, better skills and better pay.

In our jobs and growth group we have looked at skills. Even with European funding, the real problem in Cornwall is that many communities and young people never feel they have the opportunity or the learning that they need.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has talked about young people, and I am sure he will share my anxiety about the future of the youth employment initiative, which is EU-funded. It helps to provide opportunities to young people who are not in employment, education or training. The Tees valley is one area that benefits from it at the moment. Does he share my anxiety about the fact that there is no clarity from the Government about the future of that funding?

Derek Thomas: I welcome that intervention, but I will continue with my point about the real problem for us in west Cornwall. Quite often, there are two options in Cornwall. One is to go away to university, which is much easier now because we have a university in Cornwall, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton). However, the vast majority of our young people leave Cornwall, in what we describe as a brain drain. The opportunities for

[Derek Thomas]

those who are left behind are very limited. There is a real need to look at apprenticeships and how further education can be properly funded for the skills and jobs that we need for the future. I believe that Cornwall has a real opportunity to share in that, exploit it and thrive, and I believe that shared prosperity is the solution.

Our group has looked at the role of high streets, and Cornwall Council is running an inquiry into how to make high streets work. They are no longer just about shops; they are about an experience, and where people live. They are places to get support and advice, and they even include workplaces other than shops. Lots of work is being done in communities in all our constituencies in Cornwall on understanding high streets. That is not just so that we can say, "Government, give us money so we can spend it," but because we want support to make local economies low carbon. We have great talent; now, we need great opportunity.

2.56 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing this important and timely debate on the future of regional development spending.

I speak on behalf of my region, the Tees valley, which has been a net beneficiary of Britain's EU membership. In fact, it has often been the case that EU regional development funding has better supported my region than our own Governments have done. In the current spending period, 2014 to 2020, the Tees Valley has been allocated £198.1 million of EU regional funding. Those funds have provided vital investment, including in research and development and innovation, boosting small and medium-sized businesses, helping to retrain and upskill the local workforce, and supporting our area's transition to a low-carbon economy.

There has been funding for the youth employment initiative to help to tackle our youth unemployment, which is two and a half times the national average. However, that investment has simply not been enough to offset the damage wrought by the UK Government's austerity agenda. According to analysis by Institute for Public Policy Research, £6.3 billion of public spending has been taken from the north under austerity, while the south has gained £3.2 billion. That austerity has caused the public sector workforce in the north-east to fall by almost a quarter, with a huge knock-on effect to local economies.

We still have pacer trains running on yet-to-be electrified lines, despite the promise of better upgrades, while billions of pounds are poured into London's Crossrail. Many communities are no longer served by bus routes, as subsidies have been slashed. Meanwhile, the crisis at British Steel threatens to put another great British industry, deeply rooted in the north, out of action because Whitehall has failed to create the level playing field that the steel industry so desperately needs.

Our region would now be classed as a lesser developed region. The Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions estimates that the region of Tees valley and Durham would be classified as a less developed region by the EU post 2020, putting us among the poorest regions in

Europe and therefore entitling us to more money. That is absolutely shocking and demonstrates how regional inequality has skyrocketed under this Government.

At this crucial time when we need a greater share of regional development funding to give our area a boost, we do not yet know how the Government intend to allocate regional funding when EU policy no longer applies. The UK Government's proposed UK shared prosperity fund is very light on detail. If their record is anything to go by—allocating money to the areas with the highest economic return, which typically are the areas that are already the wealthiest—my area could massively lose out again. If we were to remain EU members, the CPMR estimates that, based on current population numbers, the Tees valley would be entitled to more than £270 million between 2021 and 2027. That is money that we desperately need. That share of the pot reflects the huge regional inequalities across our country, and it would make a massive difference to growth in my region.

Alex Cunningham: The SSI site in my hon. Friend's constituency is yet to see any real progress in development. That is all the more reason why we need a commitment to greater funding if we are to create jobs for people there and in my constituency, which is just across the Tees valley.

Anna Turley: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for that important intervention. He is right; there has still not been a single new job created at the SSI site in my constituency, which lost 3,000 jobs overnight in 2015. We have a plan for 20,000 jobs, but we need every bit of support and encouragement we can get to achieve that. It is not going to happen without looking more widely afield. My concern is that it will be local people that end up paying the cost of cleaning up that site.

Our share of the pot reflects the huge regional inequalities across our country and would make a massive difference to growth in my region. Ministers have indicated that regions should not lose out from the decision to leave the EU but, if current policy is anything to go by, yet again the Tees valley will be deprived of vital support.

Recently we saw the launch of the Power Up The North campaign, led by our regional media and supported by politicians, businesses and people across our communities. I congratulate them on this great campaign. It is extremely powerful and is pushing back against the old idea that success in London and the City will automatically lead to a wave of wealth, spreading out across the country, and lift up areas like Teesside on a rising tide. We know that is not the case.

We have just had the fifth anniversary of the northern powerhouse, which was launched to great fanfare. I hoped it might be a turning point in relations and inequality in this country, but five years on it is clear that the concept has been a damp squib, achieving more as a political campaign rather than delivering real power to our region.

On Teesside we have proved that when we are given power and control we can do great things, such as supporting our people to retrain after the SSI closure through our local taskforce, and developing a local industrial masterplan for the South Tees Development Corporation. We have big ambitions for carbon capture, hydrogen power, and other clean industries, but the reality is that too often we are reliant on going cap in

hand to the Government for funding. Now we are at risk of being in an even worse situation. Without better investment in the EU, the northern powerhouse will only ever be a soundbite that failed to deliver.

3.1 pm

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing this debate, which builds on the excellent debate about the shared prosperity fund led by the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis).

All of us here would like to be evidence-based policy makers. There is inconclusive data about how successful the European funding programmes have been; the London School of Economics study and the excellent House of Commons studies all show that. It is important that we learn the lessons about how that money has been invested. From my own constituency, and Cornwall more widely, I can see that this money has been absolutely essential, but we need to draw the right conclusions from previous programmes so that the Government's commitment to regional growth funding is done right and builds on the success we have seen.

Stephen Kinnock: How does the hon. Lady propose that the lessons be learned and things be improved if there is no consultation exercise?

Sarah Newton: I will come to that in a moment. At the last debate, the Minister invited us to put forward our suggestions. We do not need to wait for a formal consultation; my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) has demonstrated that. There have been consultation meetings with local enterprise partnerships and with the business community all over the country. It is up to us; we are leaders in our own communities. We should be making the most of these opportunities—today is one opportunity—so I will make some suggestions to the Minister, as he has invited suggestions about how we should go about allocating the funding.

First, we want to have designated funding for our regions. The EU funding that has been used so successfully is seldom the only source of funding. As other Members mentioned, it is often an opportunity to leverage additional funding. I want to get across the message that the huge investment in rail and buses in my constituency, where we have two universities, was enabled by European funding, but it was brought about by leveraging and working in partnership.

The way that the Treasury allocates funding and looks at gross added value often disadvantages areas with populations that are dispersed over large geographical areas. In the last five years, investment in cities and city regions has been successful, but those of us without cities—or even towns that meet the Government's criteria of a population of 135,000—are disadvantaged. That geographical designation is really important for us to meet the opportunities of our local economy to grow, through the regional industrial strategies that feed into the national industrial strategies.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Because of the processes that the Government and the EU structural fund have followed, Northern Ireland has been able to access the fund. The simple reason is that we have lower

wages and higher energy costs, and therefore a higher cost of living. It has proven to be the case that Northern Ireland needs the structural fund, and it has been a success. If the Government were able to ensure that something happens in the future along the same lines, it would be positive.

Sarah Newton: I agree that it is important that the Government honour their commitment to provide regions with the same sort of money as they would have got had we remained in the European Union. That was a clear commitment made by our party at the last general election. We will be working hard to make sure that whoever leads our party honours that commitment.

We should have opportunities to make decisions about how that money is spent, and I want those decisions to be made locally. The great city regions—I know the hon. Member for Barnsley Central is doing a good job as the Mayor of the Sheffield city region—must work in partnership. When I was a Minister at the Department for Work and Pensions, I saw the opportunity for central Government Departments to work in partnership with the metro mayors to innovate in their regions; that is something Government should be proud of and advancing.

It is not only regions or metropolitan areas with mayors that can work with Government in that way. Single-tier authorities, such as Cornwall Council and the Council of the Isles of Scilly, in partnership with our local enterprise partnership, can work on greater devolution and have far more say about how the money should be spent in our region.

In my remaining time, I want to touch on the European social fund. Debates are usually about roads, bricks and mortar rather than about the ESF's work helping people who have been out of work, and far from the labour market, into work. There has been a huge amount of innovation under this Government, particularly led by the Department for Work and Pensions, working with metro mayors. The hon. Member for Barnsley Central has been pivotal to that work, and there has been a great deal of learning.

I would like the big, national work programmes contracted by the DWP to stop at the end of this round, and I would like that money to be spent by devolving it into partnerships in regions. We have an excellent local enterprise partnership in Cornwall, with a good skills committee, which is addressing the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives articulated so well: the need to develop skills and get people into work for the economy of the future. The best approach would be to enable regions to commission employment services that meet the needs of their communities.

Obviously, we have to be mindful of the market. We have to have a thriving market in people who provide those services, but that could be done at the same time as enabling greater local partnership. Then we would see the real progress in our economy that we want to see, in Cornwall and in every part of our community, and closing the unacceptable gaps in people's life chances.

3.8 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairpersonship, Ms McDonagh. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for securing the debate.

[Gill Furniss]

It has been three years and three days since the EU referendum. During that time, the Government have failed to negotiate a decent Brexit deal, and that has resulted in uncertainty in our economy, for my constituents and throughout the country. My constituents voted to leave the European Union but they did not vote for their rights to be watered down, for their jobs to be at risk or for a less prosperous future for their children.

South Yorkshire has had its challenges and its triumphs. I am proud of our region's strong manufacturing base, which has remained resilient despite the devastation of the 1980s under the Thatcher Government. European structural funds, particularly from the European regional development fund—the ERDF—for infrastructure and the European social fund for employment, have been important elements in rebuilding our regional economy since those days. I have seen how the funds have had huge impacts in my constituency of Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough. We have fantastic facilities such as SOAR Works, which is a managed workspace at Parson Cross funded through the ERDF, and Building Better Opportunities—a great scheme to get disabled people in Sheffield into employment that has received £2 million from the European social fund.

Sadly, the Government's record on supporting the north has been a travesty and has held back the economy in our area. Everyone in Sheffield remembers that one of the very first actions of the coalition Government was to cancel a crucial £80 million loan to Sheffield Forgemasters—a clear sign that investing in the north was not a priority. The Government still talk of a northern powerhouse in slogans, but warm words will not cut it. The north needs investment to turbocharge our economy and to give communities the jobs, skills and opportunities that they deserve.

Under the EU system we would be entitled to a higher level of investment. As the report notes, South Yorkshire would be entitled to more than €500 a head in the next six-year period, which could amount to around £30 million for my constituency alone: a massive amount of money. We have seen food bank use rocket, particularly after the roll-out of universal credit. If the Government fail to invest in areas such as South Yorkshire, we will see more people struggle and rely on food banks to survive.

The 2017 Conservative manifesto stated:

“We will use the structural fund money that comes back to the UK following Brexit to create a United Kingdom Shared Prosperity Fund”.

The fund is to be targeted, flexible and devolved, and it is intended to promote inclusive growth. But although they constantly refer to it as the means by which they will

“tackle inequalities between communities...especially in those parts of our country whose economies are furthest behind”,

the Government have yet to offer any clarity on how it will work or the mechanisms by which it will be distributed.

As we know, the Government said they would consult on the proposals, but here we are in June 2019 and the consultation is still not forthcoming. Will the Minister take this opportunity to assure my constituents in Brightside and Hillsborough that the Government will cover any shortfall that results from leaving the EU? Furthermore,

the Minister will be aware that the framework for distribution of the ERDF in the period from 2021 to 2027 has the funding of low-carbon schemes at its heart. Will the Minister commit to a similar focus in the shared prosperity fund in response to the climate emergency?

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I am sorry, but Members must go down to three-minute speeches, so will everybody be circumspect about making interventions?

3.12 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing this debate, which is important to my constituency of South East Cornwall as we prepare to leave the EU and seize the growth and trade opportunities that Brexit offers. I am grateful for the opportunity to make a brief contribution and am pleased to see that my hon. Friend the Minister will respond.

Cornwall may be a beautiful county of beaches, moorland and communities, but it lags behind the UK on many economic indicators. Its rurality is a blessing, but it puts a brake on growth and prosperity. We are closing the gap with other regions and nations, but we need to maintain that progress. European structural and investment funds have undoubtedly helped to boost the Cornish economy, creating jobs and boosting skills, higher education and inclusion. Better connectivity has also been a benefit. Just over 90% of my constituency now has access to superfast broadband, which is excellent news, but there is still work to be done for the remaining 10%. Local transport links, such as the A38, about which I had an Adjournment debate last week, need to be prioritised. Cornwall's economic future is a positive one, from the development of the space sector to the growth of creative industries, tourism and high-quality food and drink production. I want to maintain the momentum after we leave the EU.

Brexit provides us with an opportunity to reassess how money is allocated and to make sure it is spent wisely and without the red tape of EU bureaucracy. Will my hon. Friend the Minister give an indication as to when we can expect the consultation on the shared prosperity fund? It has been promised and it would be good to know when it will happen. A refreshed approach to regional policy that is strategic and devolved will help to ensure that funding is targeted in the right areas, better reflecting the needs of my constituents. All hon. Members are fully aware that we contribute more to the EU budget than we get back each year. I ask the Minister to ensure that we receive a fair share of the Brexit dividend that reflects Cornwall's unique economic and social challenges.

3.15 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing this important debate. I am pleased to see Members here from all parties and from every corner of the United Kingdom, especially from communities in our least developed regions, such as those in South Yorkshire, where I am proud to serve as Mayor and MP. Such communities are

among the hardest hit by austerity, by stalled economic growth, and by the failure of successive Governments to address widening regional inequalities.

The stark truth is that, from 2020 onwards, funding allocated to regions by the EU will come to an end, and 2021 marks the end of the Government's local growth fund programme. Taken together, those funds have been the glue holding together many of our communities. What replaces those funds must replace them on the basis of what would have been received had the referendum result been different. The creation of a shared prosperity fund provides a vital opportunity to do things differently. To heal the divisions in our country and to turn the dial in those least developed regions, we must think and do differently.

The UK has one of the most centralised political systems in the world, with the inevitable consequence that some of the decisions taken by Westminster and Whitehall, however well-intentioned, do not reflect the needs or opportunities of local areas. Those living in the UK's least developed regions are feeling the impact of the equality gap, which grows ever wider. I am hugely positive about our collective ability in the north of England to make real progress, provided that we have the right powers underpinned by the right resources. My hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) mentioned the Power Up The North campaign, and increasingly there seems to be a growing recognition that the answers to the many challenges that we face do not lie in Westminster or Whitehall.

In the final minute that I have available to me, I will rattle through the four principles that I have set out for the shared prosperity fund.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dan Jarvis: I will not; I have very little time.

First, the annual budget for the shared prosperity fund should be no less in real terms than both the EU and local growth funding streams that it replaces. Secondly, there should be no competitive bidding element. Thirdly, the fund must be fully devolved to the areas that have in place robust, democratically accountable governance models. Finally, the funding must be stretched over multiple years, beyond the vagaries of spending reviews and parliamentary cycles.

If we want to create a country that works for everybody, let us take the opportunity to be bold, and let us make sure that the shared prosperity fund does what it says on the tin and enables all of our communities to share and prosper in our country's economic growth.

3.18 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The lack of clarity and detail over the potential loss of funding three years after Brexit is a cause for general alarm. Those critical funds are extremely important in my constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran, where they fund employability initiatives and measures to tackle poverty and the promotion of social inclusion. Three years later, we still have no idea how much cash the replacement shared prosperity fund will have to distribute. We do not know what charities and voluntary organisations will be eligible for funding. We do not know how the funding will be administered and which

programmes that currently benefit from the fund will be left staring a black hole in the face. I urge the Minister to give much-needed and much sought after clarification on this issue. Will we have equivalent like for like replacement funding post-Brexit, and can he guarantee it whether or not the UK leaves the EU with or without a deal? A yes or no would be interesting.

We need answers, we need honesty and of course we need an unequivocal commitment from the Government that the communities who need the fund and who benefit from it will not be sacrificed, abandoned and forgotten as the Government drag us off the Brexit cliff-edge. I remind the Minister that the Government must respect the devolution settlement, and that it is imperative that the UK Government work with all the devolved Administrations to reach agreement on future funding arrangements that make sense for all parts of the UK. I look forward to hearing what he has to say about that. My constituency and country must not be short-changed.

3.20 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is good to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing the debate. If we have learned anything from the past few years, it is that people feel ignored by politicians and powerless to influence decisions about the most important things in their lives, such as whether a local hospital is kept open, whether their child's education is properly funded, whether bus services continue so that they can get to work, or even whether they can afford to buy or rent a decent home to live in. They are told that the economy is growing, but everywhere they look services are being cut. Nowhere is that more true than in the north of England. The north has a population of 15 million people, which is roughly twice that of London. It has five major cities, 265 towns—including mine—and more than 1,000 villages and small communities. Our economy is more than twice the size of Scotland's, and if the north were a country it would be the ninth largest in the EU. We have eight major ports, 29 universities and four national parks. We produce a third of the UK's renewable energy and are leaders in the manufacturing, scientific and high-tech sectors. That is a pretty impressive CV.

Despite that, however, and despite the introduction of the northern powerhouse five years ago, regional inequality has grown since 2010. The north has borne the brunt of the Government's austerity drive with a £3.6 billion cut in public spending, whereas the south-east and the south-west had £4.7 billion extra in real terms. There are now 200,000 more children living in poverty in the north than there were five years ago. That is a scandal. The economy has been growing consistently throughout those five years. If such a huge number of additional children have been growing up in poverty during that period, it is ample evidence that the economy does not now work for everyone.

Why, in 2019, does London still hold all the power and the resources? The sooner we realise that business as usual is not going to cut it and that further Westminster handouts on Westminster terms will not be enough, the better. We do not need more crumbs from the table. It has been clear for a long time that people are fed up to

[Justin Madders]

their back teeth with the current approach. Is it any wonder, when the system clearly does not work for them, that they feel ignored, isolated and held back?

Our country will be undergoing massive changes in the next 10 or 20 years. People feel they need to see a change. The central aim of the shared prosperity fund is to reduce inequality and enable all our communities to share in the country's economic growth. So let us really enable our communities to do that. Let us give them the responsibility, power and resources to shape their future, in line with local priorities and local need, using a bottom-up model in which decision making and accountability are at local government level, and which delivers real change whose benefits they can see.

I hope the Minister will be able to provide more detail about how the fund will be designed, and how it will work and be administered. I hope that he will also provide the guarantee that we all seek, that communities will be left no worse off. Finally, I urge him to get on and publish the consultation, so that we can address the systemic inequalities between our regions and ensure that all our communities share in the prosperity of one of the most prosperous nations in the world.

3.23 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for introducing the debate so well. Colleagues representing Cornwall constituencies have made a good case for the argument that the far south-west does not get its fair share, and they are right—we do not. We have not had our fair share under the Governments of the past nine years, and we risk getting an even worse deal if we do not get post-Brexit funding right. I worry that we are getting it wrong politically in Parliament at the moment, and that the Government are getting it wrong through their lack of planning for what would replace EU funding for the region after no deal.

Whatever our views on the European Union, and whether we voted remain or leave in the south-west, there is no doubt that the EU funded us fairly, and Westminster continues to fund us at below-average levels. That is despite the fact that Cornwall is one of the poorest counties in the entire country, and despite huge levels of deprivation in Plymouth, with below-average spend across the county. When we get lumped together as part of the south it annoys me, because some of the poorest communities in the country are in Plymouth and Cornwall. Our peripherality has made things harder, but that is not recognised by Westminster in the funding formulas, although the European Union has recognised it in the way it has distributed funding. One need only look at towns funding to see that in action. Out of a £1 billion fund there was only £30 million for the entire south-west region. It was supposed to be allocated on the basis of need, and that episode has not built confidence in the way any future Government will allocate funding after Brexit.

There is an important rationale for funding based on a clear distinction, so that wherever someone lives—in Plymouth, Devon, Cornwall, or anywhere else in the country—they should be funded fairly and given the same opportunities as people have anywhere else. That is

what must happen. I worry because there is the risk of no deal on 31 October and the new system is not in place. People do not know what will happen to the funding streams that they currently enjoy. They do not know what forms they will have to fill in, what deadlines they will have to meet, or what happens to existing funded programmes. I worry that that is causing concern.

I remember the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), now a Tory leadership contender, starting the referendum campaign in Cornwall—in the constituency, I believe, of the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth—and grasping a pasty. I think he called it the pasty of independence. We now know that the geographical indicators that protect Cornish pasties might not be there with a no-deal Brexit. In fact, it looks as if they probably will not. So we need to make sure in the far south-west that we protect not only our funding streams, but our fantastic products. That is really at the heart of the issue. We need to make sure that whatever system replaces the European funding if Brexit does happen, distribution will be fair. I worry at the moment that the poor deal for the south-west will continue unless there is a consultation that clearly brings about change, to give such regions a better deal.

3.26 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing the debate and on the case that he outlined.

For the past 20 years or so, Wales has been a net beneficiary of the European regional development fund and that funding has allowed the transformation of towns and villages across south Wales. There has been hugely significant investment in Merthyr Tydfil town centre, which has helped to regenerate the whole town centre—a new college development, and the creation of a new square that has become the focal point for a calendar of cultural events. The A465, which my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) mentioned, and which has had a history of collisions over many years, has vastly improved because of a continuing project to create a dual carriageway. There is one more phase to complete, linking my constituency to west Wales and, to the east, through to the M50, M5 and midlands. That has all been possible with the support of regional development funding from the EU.

In communities across my constituency, such as New Tredegar, Treharris, Bedlinog and Rhymney, there have been transport schemes, flood alleviation works and town and village centre regeneration, all supported through regional development funding, which has proved essential in beginning the process of regenerating communities across the south Wales valleys.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central, the Thatcher Government ripped the heart out of our communities, threw countless people's jobs on the scrapheap and decimated towns and villages across south Wales, without having any plan to replace the jobs that were lost. The economic decline of the '80s and '90s can still be felt today, despite the investment that the valleys have had, which stemmed from the work of the Labour Government. I have tried to outline the history of the communities that I represent, and to highlight why economic deprivation exists. We benefited

from regional development funding quite simply because we needed it, which is why it is essential that we now have clarity from the Government about the future for the shared prosperity fund. The Government have not been clear about their proposal for the fund. We were promised, as we have heard, that consultation would take place before the end of 2018, and we are now halfway through 2019. There is no sign of the consultation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) has said, that is completely unacceptable.

A few weeks ago in Welsh questions I asked the Secretary of State to provide clarity on the fund and how it would work, what areas of the country would benefit, and how much the fund would be—and there was no answer from the Secretary of State. I hope that today the Minister will provide some of the clarity that is needed. The people of Wales, and people across the UK, were told by the leave campaign that we would not lose a penny if we left the EU. As things stand, we are due to leave the EU later this year and we are still unclear about the many millions of pounds that Wales currently receives as part of the EU, and how that money will be replaced by the Government. There is a need for certainty, so I have two questions for the Minister. Will the new fund be based on need, and will the Government respect devolution in their allocation of the new funding?

3.29 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing this debate on an issue that is close to my heart, given the effect of European funding on the highlands and islands over the years. He cited CPMR figures of €13 billion and £11 billion, and as he rightly said, those numbers have been backed up by the House of Commons Library, and may even be an underestimate of the funding available had we remained in the EU. Indeed, if the Government had decided to take a sensible approach, we would still be beneficiaries of that funding.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about the least developed regions, which get a bigger share of that money because they have greater need, and about the EU stepping in where Westminster had not. My constituency contains some big, iconic signals of that. Predating devolution, the Kessock bridge crosses from Inverness to Ross-shire, and it would not have been delivered without intervention from the EU. It has been transformational. Similarly, the University of the Highlands and Islands is now a physical entity, and it has helped hugely with some of the issues described by Members today. There is no town, village or community in the highlands and islands that does not show a wee EU sign to explain how it has benefited from that funding over the years. The hon. Gentleman went on to talk about a range of positive and social economic benefits of European funding, and we share that view.

The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) asked a question that many of us have asked: why is there no consultation? What is holding up the Government? He raised the important point that we will no longer be a member of the European Investment Bank, and the deficit that that holds. The hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) said that people are looking not for a

handout but for a hand up, and he listed the criteria. That is where the EU has stepped in in the past. He spoke about a protected allocation of funds, and said there is no reason to believe that that is not what is intended. Let us see the evidence for that; let us see the delivery. There is no detail and, as we have heard, not even a consultation.

The hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) spoke about investment and innovation, business and work skills, youth employment in the Tees valley, and about how essential those things are given this UK Government, and the times of Tory austerity we have been living through. She said that people have no knowledge about what is coming, and with her customary niceness she said that plans are “very light on detail”—I would have used stronger terms, but she is absolutely right. The hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) said that the way the Treasury looks at funding overlooks rural areas, and that she will be working hard to ensure her party honours that commitment. We need to hear the Minister say that the funding will be fully replaced, and whether it will be included in the spending review.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) talked about the three years of uncertainty that the communities and recipients of that spending have lived through, and she wondered where we will go next. Importantly, she mentioned the positive impact of the funding on disabled people, because often the best of it goes to those who are left behind in the thoughts of Westminster. She spoke about there being slogans from the Tory Government rather than investment, and today the Minister has an opportunity to put some meat on the bones and give the guarantees that everybody is asking for.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the importance of such funding in the shadow of universal credit, and as an MP for a constituency that has seen UC over six years, from pilot to full roll-out, I know that money from the EU is vital to address some of the deficits caused by that programme. Indeed, we share a rise in food bank reliance as a result. She said that funding should be targeted, focused and devolved, but we are still waiting for a consultation.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) talked about how regional equality has dropped, and there are now extra children living in poverty. He asked why in 2019—I agree with this—Westminster still holds all the power. He said that people are fed up to the back teeth with Westminster's approach, and that we need bottom-up decision making. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) spoke about below-average spending from Westminster. He said that EU funds are fairer, and that there is a better recognition of the issues by the EU. He rightly spoke about the risks of a no-deal scenario.

In the short time that she took to make her speech, my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) spoke succinctly, and rightly, about the real living alarm over the lack of detail about what is coming. Who will be eligible? How will it work? What will it be worth? Will there be—this has been mooted but not explained in any detail—like-for-like funding? Will that guarantee be yes or no, regardless of a deal or the catastrophe of a no-deal hard Brexit? She pointed out, as have nearly all the contributors today, that the funding formula must respect the devolution

[Drew Hendry]

settlement, and she said that neither she, her constituency, nor her country should be short-changed. We call on the Minister to give those guarantees.

I am grateful to the all-party group for post-Brexit funding for nations, regions and local areas for its reports. It backed up a lot of the comments made around this room. It had lots of submissions, including from the Welsh Government, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, EHRC, and many educational and voluntary bodies, which all said that budget funding should be “no less in real terms than the EU and UK funding streams it replaces.”

It pointed out that shares for the devolved nations should not be reduced, and that as we have heard, it should be a devolved matter.

The hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) rightly asked when we will see action, even just the consultation—that is a pro-Brexit Member asking for that guarantee. The hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) spoke about the failure of successive UK Governments to address regional disparity, and he mentioned the most centralised political system in the world here at Westminster. I think his four principles are absolutely right: the budget should be no less than it currently is, there should be no competitive bidding, it should be fully devolved, and it must be beyond spending reviews and political cycles.

We have had a promise from the Tory Government, but then delay after delay in getting any information. Evidence from the House of Commons Library shows that we are approaching nearly 300 parliamentary questions, without an answer on any detail of this funding.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman makes a point about European funding being replaced by UK funding. If funding does come from the UK rather than the EU in future, will he commit to all projects being branded as co-Scottish Government and UK Government?

Drew Hendry: It would be much easier to respond to that kind of comment if the UK Government had given any details about how this will go forward. While the hon. Gentleman worries about slogans and branding, I worry about getting the detail to explain what communities across our constituencies, including my own, will get from this programme in future. When will we know the detail about what will be spent, who will be eligible, and will it be fully devolved? Once the Minister has answered those questions, we can go back to talking about flags and slogans.

Communities and charities have waited years to find out what will be available post-Brexit. The devolution settlement must be respected. As we have said, since Brexit is distracting the UK Government from doing anything worthwhile at the moment, let us revoke article 50 and get on with doing things properly, which would clear things up right away. Brexit will cost Scottish communities millions, and this particular issue must not add to that burden.

3.38 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): What a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship again, Ms McDonagh, and I thank my hon. Friend the

Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for securing this debate, and for all the work he has undertaken in Parliament to champion the issue of EU replacement funding and what to do about those regions in greatest need.

This debate has shown Parliament at its best. We have colleagues from Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the north-east, and Cornwall, but I think the star must go to Yorkshire, which is out in force this afternoon. There has been near unanimity across the Chamber, and we heard a number of powerful, well-argued speeches on the need for more information about the prosperity fund, to find out when it will be sorted out and how it will be disbursed, and what the Government will do about the regions in greatest need. I hope the Minister takes on board that it is a cross-party argument and that he listens, rather than simply chuntering from a sedentary position.

This is a timely debate. I am not sure we could be in a more uncertain time on Brexit, and the whole issue of how the prosperity fund will operate and replace EU funding has not been resolved, which is creating uncertainty for many regions. Even at this late stage, we are not entirely sure what the prosperity fund will cover. Will the Minister confirm that it will include all the European structural investment funds—the regional development fund, the social fund, the cohesion fund, the maritime and fisheries fund and the agricultural fund for rural development—as well as funding for youth unemployment and European territorial co-operation? It would be helpful to know exactly what it will encompass and how much money will be attached to it.

The second issue, which is at the crux of the debate, is what the Government will do about the recent research from the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions that shows that regional allocations from the EU would increase in the period from 2021-27 and affect positively at least five regions—Tees Valley and Durham; South Yorkshire; Lincolnshire; west Wales and the valleys; and Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly—and indeed up to seven regions. Over that period, it is estimated they would receive an additional €13 billion in funding, up 22%. We need to hear whether the Minister accepts that research and what the Government will do about it.

We have heard from hon. Members that such an increase is necessary because of a worsening of the relative position of the UK regions, with many areas falling behind the EU average for regional prosperity. Research cited in the House of Commons Library document as well as Eurostat data show that regional inequalities in the UK are growing. That is a terrible indictment of the Government's policies; we need to know what they will do about it.

The Minister will know that the UK's less developed regions have called for an ambitious new UK regional policy to recognise and address that need. My own council in County Durham got together with leaders from the other affected regions to ask the Minister for a long-term, urgent approach to tackle widening regional inequalities. They argue that particular attention must be paid to the regions furthest behind in terms of economic activity, areas with increased deprivation, rural and island areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions that suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic challenges.

The leaders wrote to the Minister asking the Government to make five commitments: an ambitious regional policy for the UK that recognises the need for a specific mechanism for those regions furthest behind; the UK shared prosperity fund should be adequately funded and at least match the €13 billion that UK regions would have received under the next EU programme, which is in addition to existing national local growth funding that under current EU programmes is often used as match funding; the UK SPF should be appropriately devolved; the UK SPF should reduce the administrative burden for applicants; and a guarantee that UK regions will not be worse off in funding available for regional development beyond 2020 because of our leaving the EU. In fact, they are asking the Government to make some of the commitments about Brexit we heard before, during and—not so often but sometimes—since the referendum.

I must say that the Minister's response to the council leaders was very weak; he said what we already know. They were asking about those five points, wanting lots of commitment and detail from the Government, because they are anxious and want to know what will happen about future funding in their areas, which is so important. They got a letter back saying basically that we have an extension until 31 October before we leave the EU—this was in May, by the way—and that the Government are considering all options and will consult on how to carry forward the prosperity fund.

We are all saying to the Minister that that really is not good enough. We need, at this very late point, some detail from him about how the fund will operate and under what criteria. What sort of money are we talking about? Will it be disbursed in the same way as it has been under the EU? Will the Government take need into account and focus in particular on the regions with the greatest need?

Like all hon. Members in the Chamber, I feel strongly about this issue because our constituencies are in regions that need to be supported to reach their full potential. This is not just pleading and bleating. These are amazing regions with huge skills and talents among the population, and they all need development in digital and higher level skills. They need to use our universities and colleges to drive up skills development. There is need for investment in renewable energy in the north-east, and in pharmaceuticals. We also need to upgrade the transport system and ensure that everyone in those regions can reach their potential and contribute to the future prosperity we all want to see. I hope the Minister will tell us something about how we can ensure that prosperity can be achieved by everyone.

3.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on proposing and securing the debate. I put him on notice that I intend to finish early to give him the customary ability to say that he disagrees with most of what I say. I will let him think about that while I am talking—he may surprise himself.

Many hon. Members have spoken in the debate, and I was most encouraged by the heartfelt speeches by the Opposition spokespeople, the hon. Members for Inverness,

Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) and for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), about the importance of this issue. It really demonstrated to me the passion there is across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to achieve and drive a local community. As a proud Unionist, I was reminded of the awesome foursome of our United Kingdom, which we should hold precious in our hearts. When the UK shared prosperity fund comes forward, I hope it will demonstrate our commitment to create growth in every single part of the UK, wherever it may be.

We have had a wide-ranging debate. As well as talking about the shared prosperity fund, the hon. Member for Sheffield Central, the proposer of the debate, took the opportunity to make his fundamental point that the Government have not supported the regions. I fundamentally disagree. This is the Government who created the northern powerhouse, and we are investing hundreds of millions—in fact, billions—of pounds directly into the northern economy. We did not see that under the last Labour Government. If the hon. Gentleman wants proof that the northern powerhouse is real, he has only to look to the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), the proud Mayor of the Sheffield city region, who is sitting a few seats down from him, and to his four mayoral colleagues across the north of England.

We heard from many hon. Members about our being such a centralised country. For the first time in a generation in England, this Government have taken power, money and influence away from London and returned it to our regions. Surely that is a good thing. I am sure it is widely supported by Members across the Chamber. Those of us who want to see all areas of our country thrive should welcome that decentralisation and return of powers to mayors and regions.

Mr Betts: I am sure the Minister agrees that this is about not just Government actions but the impact of those actions. Will he confirm that, despite what the Government have done, or think they have done, since 2010, the difference in gross value added between the south-east and the north has not changed?

Jake Berry: The hon. Gentleman will have to send me the figures he refers to. Across the north of England, unemployment is lower than it has been for a generation. Picking up on the comments of the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), £450 million has been committed to a devolution deal for the Tees valley and £120 million has been invested in the SSI site.

Frankly, if the Labour local authorities in the Sheffield city region could get their act together and agree what powers they should hand to the Mayor of South Yorkshire—I know he is already doing an excellent job, but I want him to be given those powers so he can continue to drive the hopes and dreams of the people of South Yorkshire—the Sheffield city region could receive nearly £1 billion as part of its devolution deal. It is shameful that Labour councils are blocking this Government's giving nearly £1 billion to the Sheffield city region. The councils should hang their heads in shame. We are debating European structural funds, but all this is connected; we cannot consider Europe on its own.

[Jake Berry]

Let me set out some truths. There was reference to a report that mentioned growth of up to 22% in money for less developed areas. That report does not take into account the points made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place, about European countries that may join the European Union during the spending period; it does not take into account the cap that the European Union itself has said it would like to see on spending increases; and it is an estimate. That estimate would go into the European Union and be negotiated.

Paul Blomfield: Will the Minister give way?

Jake Berry: I will in a moment. I will develop this point first.

Once the negotiation had taken place in Europe, the British Government would bring that figure into the comprehensive spending review and negotiate how it was distributed—which parts should go to European structural funds, to the Department for Work and Pensions and to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Only after that would any of the bodies have certainty about how much they were going to receive.

In fact, if we accept that the quantum of the UK shared prosperity fund should be negotiated through the comprehensive spending review, people will find themselves with exactly the same certainty under that fund as they would have had if we had continued with European structural funds. There is of course certainty until January 2021, when the current spending period ends, and the Government have been clear that the UK shared prosperity fund will start in 2021, so there will be no gap.

Patricia Gibson: Will the Minister give way?

Jake Berry: I have to give way first to the hon. Member for Sheffield Central, who opened the debate.

People talked about crashing out of the European Union with no deal. Frankly, I do not expect that to happen. Nor do I accept that, even if it did happen, it would look like a crash out of the European Union. However, even if we accepted that analysis—I do not—the Treasury has given a guarantee about the current spending period for European structural funds, which means people who are in receipt of them or want to apply for them should carry on as normal, regardless of Brexit.

Paul Blomfield: The Minister knows we are not talking about the current period of structural funds. We are talking about the next period of structural funds, and about what we would have expected to receive had we remained a member of the European Union. We should receive no less than that. I know the European Commission has said since the publication of the CPMR report that, in part because of the impact on the EU budget as a result of Brexit, it may be that regions can expect to receive not 22% but 8% more, but that is not the circumstance we are debating. We are debating what we would have got had we remained in the European Union. Even if I accepted the Minister's premise, that would mean £536 million for South Yorkshire. Will he guarantee that?

Jake Berry: The hon. Gentleman needs to make a decision. It is all well and good debating what we would get if we remained in the European Union, but we will not remain in the European Union. He has to decide whose side he is on. There are 17.4 million people who voted for Brexit. Is he on their side, or is he on the side of the cabal of politicians in this House who have sought repeatedly to block Brexit? I know whose side I am on. I am on the side of the hundreds, thousands and millions of people across the north of England who voted for Brexit. They gave this Parliament a clear instruction. To debate what life would be like if we remained in the EU is, frankly, an irrelevance.

I hope I can now move on to address some of the other points—

Patricia Gibson: Will the Minister give way?

Jake Berry: I will, because I said I would, but it has to be brief.

Patricia Gibson: I came to this debate to ask for clarity. If I heard the Minister correctly, it appears we now have clarity. Although he has not told us what will happen to this money in a no-deal situation, he has, if I have understood him correctly, clarified that the Government are giving no guarantees to the projects that currently benefit from structural funds about the next funding period. Is that correct?

Jake Berry: I hope the hon. Lady goes back and reads the *Hansard* report of my opening statement. I have limited time, but she will find that I answered both those questions. Many people—including the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, who is chuntering and chuckling to himself—have said that the problem is that places do not have certainty. I was simply pointing out that even if we remained in Europe—I sincerely hope we do not—they still would not have the certainty they seek in any event.

I want to mention briefly the comments of the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who said we should start some form of consultation. Although, clearly, the consultation has been delayed, I know he is aware, because it has been said in the House when he has been present, that more than 500 people have already been involved in a consultation with the Government—what we might call a pre-consultation consultation. I have consulted widely with the metro Mayors both about this subject and more widely about the impact of Brexit in places such as South Yorkshire, where the hon. Member for Barnsley Central is the Mayor. We are already involved in detailed discussions with officials in the devolved Administrations about the form and function of the UK shared prosperity fund, of which I am sure the SNP spokesman is aware.

I wish I had time to talk in more detail about the brilliant speeches that were made by many others, but I will move directly to address some of the points made by the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for City of Durham, and I am sure many others. The Government have been absolutely clear that we will respect the devolution settlement when it comes to the UK shared prosperity fund. That has not changed, and it will not change. We have been clear that we will consult widely in order to get right the UK shared prosperity fund, which is designed to tackle inequality.

I know that, in many cases, the people who spoke about the benefit of European funds know they are not perfect. The SNP spokesman said he sees a wee European flag on many projects. One of my jobs in Government is to take back the money from projects that forgot to put that wee European flag on them, because it is one of the requirements of the hugely complicated and bureaucratic EU structural funds that if someone does not put that wee European flag on their project, the money, in many cases, has to be recovered. We are consulting on a UK shared prosperity fund to ensure that funding is simplified. We will be consulting shortly, and the quantum of the fund will be set during the comprehensive spending review, in the same way that EU structural funds would have been.

3.59 pm

Paul Blomfield: I am sorry that the Minister deliberately misrepresented my intervention. That was a comfortable way of dodging the question before us, which is: will our regions lose out as a result of our departing the European Union? As the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth highlighted, the Government have given a commitment that they should not. As the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) highlighted, we are asking not for a handout but for a hand up—strategic investment in our economies—to ensure that we do not lose out. At the third time of asking, in debates and correspondence, the Minister has not answered the question. We will keep pressing.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Adult Community Services

[MIKE GAPES *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered re-procurement of adult community services by Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire Clinical Commissioning Group.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I am pleased that this important subject has been selected for debate. Although they cannot be present, my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) fully support my comments. This is an important issue for the people of Bristol South, and it is a local example of the debate on the legacy of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 and of the invidious position that local managers are being put in to understand the procurement rules.

Hon. Members know that I speak frequently about accountability and the opaque way in which many parts of the NHS operate. We seem to have lost sight of the fact that, however individual bodies are constituted, our health services are public services that are paid for by taxpayers—our constituents. I have also repeatedly said that if we keep asking people to pay more for our health services, they must have a greater say in the way that those services are run, particularly when they are being changed.

I have spoken before of my concern about the attitude of my local clinical commissioning group in Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire to the openness and transparency of its work, especially on the reprocurement of adult community services. The lengths to which the CCG, supported by NHS Improvement, has gone to hide, cover up and obfuscate are nothing short of a scandal. Most infuriatingly, the whole protracted cloak-and-dagger exercise has been entirely unnecessary, because a far less onerous and costly approach could have been used instead. The reprocurement is the wrong approach at the wrong time to developing community services, and runs counter to the direction of travel being set, in theory, by the new NHS 10-year plan.

Before I review the shortcomings of the reprocurement in greater detail, I will remind hon. Members why it matters. Away from the jargon, acronyms, terse letters and confidentiality agreements, thousands of people across Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire simply want to know what is happening to their local health services.

My constituent Clive got in touch just over a year ago to tell me about the great work being done at the Healthy Together leg clinic at the Witherwood Centre, which provides intervention and treatment for the leg ulcers of patients in south Bristol. It is exactly the sort of joined-up, innovative and integrated community provision that Ministers tell us they want to see—a true partnership between Bristol Community Health, local GP practices and Age UK in Bristol, which come together across different sites to deliver gold-standard patient care that promotes faster and longer-lasting wound healing. The clinic also provides a social setting

[Karin Smyth]

where patients feel more supported and are encouraged to feel more in control of their condition. There is time for people to care.

The service has transformed countless lives in my constituency and has been nominated for a national award. As I saw first hand when I visited the clinic earlier this month, it is an exemplar of the sort of collaborative provision that the new adult community services contract could and should expand on. Such collaboration takes years to yield results and very much responds to the local needs of the particular community.

The people who are providing the service, however, do not know for how long they will be able to continue, because the CCG will not tell them. The patients do not know for how long they will be able to access that life-changing service, because the CCG will not tell them. As the local MP, I cannot lobby, engage or reassure people, despite asking repeatedly for a peek behind the self-imposed reprourement iron curtain, because—hon. Members will have guessed it—the CCG will not tell me.

Interestingly, another consequence of the process, which I do not have time to really go into, is the destabilising impact on the voluntary sector. Age UK will have to wait, cap in hand, to see which successful bidder secures the primary contract and how it then decides to sub-contract the provision. The same goes for all voluntary organisations involved in this sort of service provision. It would be bad enough if the Healthy Together clinic were a one-off—the only service caught up in a closed-shop procurement mess—but it is not. In truth, every adult community service is in the same position, which is simply not good enough.

Despite a year of making speeches in this place, asking questions of Ministers, doing time-consuming research and making countless phone calls to offices, neither the CCG locally nor NHS Improvement nationally will engage with me beyond continually asserting that they had no choice but to go down this route. That is a prime example of what the Health and Social Care Committee referred to in its recent report, which said that the

“problems stem not only from the procurement rules themselves, but also from people’s interpretation of these rules and their difficulty in understanding what is permissible within the rules.”

In place of answers, I am forced to restate the litany of my constituents’ questions and concerns that have essentially gone unanswered. First, there is a fundamental lack of clarity surrounding the reprourement and an abject failure to link it to any broader NHS strategies. I am not the only one who is concerned about the process. I have been spoken to privately by many consultants, nurses, and other staff throughout the healthcare system; I am grateful to them for contacting me.

At no point has the CCG properly defined a needs assessment in the request for proposals. Moreover, at no point has it made the business case for change—the most basic starting point for any such process. Staggeringly, there is no service baseline, so we do not know what services exist. By extension, there are no defined outcomes, so bidders are being asked to make proposals. That is not what commissioning is meant to be about.

Although Ministers continue to trumpet the importance of the sustainability and transformation plans, there is no sense of alignment with those plans, the NHS long-term

plan or the emerging integrated care systems. Similarly absent is any indication of integration with local councils on social care or public health, which we all acknowledge are the key issues facing our constituents.

Secondly, there are concerns about the chosen procurement process, because any number of much less onerous and costly approaches were possible. As ever, however, accurately assessing the process is near impossible because of the vice-like secrecy that the CCG has used throughout. What is certain is that we do not know how much it is costing the CCG or the bidders, which include the current not-for-profit community service providers. That means that we do not know how much it is costing us, the taxpayers.

I worked in the national health service for many years, and I have some experience of procurement in the organisation, but I have struggled to understand properly the process through which the procurement has been undertaken. To illustrate, the CCG’s description of the chosen process, in its own words from its own document—bear with me, Mr Gapes, because I did not write it—says:

“The procurement is being undertaken using a process developed by the CCG which has similarities to a competitive process with negotiation. For the avoidance of doubt, the CCG is not running the process strictly in accordance with any specific procedure set out in the Regulations so reserves the right to depart from that form of procedure at any point. This Request for Proposals sets out the procurement process the CCG plans to use for this particular Contract. The inclusion of particular stages, the use of terminology and any other indication shall not be taken to mean that the CCG intends to hold itself bound by the full scope of the Regulations.”

What does that mean? I think it means that the process is as clear as mud, carried out behind a wall of secrecy, but with a disclaimer that enables the CCG to do what it wants without our knowledge. Although we cannot access the process details, what we know does not bode well.

There are myriad loose ends and errors throughout the process. Taken together, they form a significant body of concerning issues. Of course, I would never have known about them—most people do not—if I had not scoured 300 pages of detail and 100 clarification questions asked by bidders. In fairness, I doubt the CCG was expecting anybody outside the process, including the local MP, to do so, but I read them all because I like detail and I think it is important to know what is going on. A lot of the gaps and oversights concerned me.

There seem to have been incorrect working assessments about bed numbers at South Bristol Community Hospital; gaps relating to workforce numbers and staff who have been TUPE-ed; and a number of misunderstandings and examples of where the CCG lacked knowledge about current contracts, rental payments and void space. There is also missing information about assets, and the bidders were apparently expected to carry out the due diligence. That not only places a huge burden on providers, but runs the risk that the entire process will collapse if it is not carried out correctly, as has happened elsewhere. It is worth highlighting that the National Audit Office investigation into the collapse of the UnitingCare Partnership contract in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough found that bidders

“faced significant difficulties in pricing their bids accurately due to limitations in the available data”.

The evidence I have seen in the documentation suggests that that is now happening.

We should all be very worried about that, because failed procurements in Staffordshire for cancer services and end-of-life care, and in Cambridge and Peterborough, had similar procurement processes to the one chosen by Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire CCG. In each case, there was a secretive process, a complex procurement methodology and a failure to engage. Together, they cost taxpayers millions, and they all failed. Instead of learning lessons, NHS Improvement and the CCG seem intent on repeating the mistakes.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does she agree that the complexity of the procurement process and the difficulty that she—an expert in this area—is experiencing means that patients who rely on these services and workers in not-for-profit organisations, who deserve to know what the process means and what the outcomes will be for them, find it impossible to take part as important stakeholders?

Karin Smyth: Absolutely—I completely agree. That is why I will continue to speak up on behalf of my constituents; I know I have my hon. Friend's support.

Predictably, I would like to finish where I began, on the issue of secrecy and a lack of transparency. As I have highlighted, this absurd behind-closed-doors approach has bedevilled the reprocurement from the off. If this is such a great change to community services, why are we not trumpeting it? Reprocurement was first referred to in governing body papers in May 2018, but other than that there has been virtually nothing. There was no official announcement, no media blitz, no news stories or television news clips, no leaflets in local GP surgeries or South Bristol Community Hospital to enable local people to have their say on the plans—nothing. Although there has been talk of consultation, it seems that only 20 people from south Bristol took part. In fairness, there were some nods to engagement, and surveys were completed by 196 people. There was an engagement planning workshop with patients, carers and the voluntary sector, but because it is a contracting process, they were asked to sign a confidentiality agreement.

There is no evidence that even that limited feedback has been listened to or acted on. The workshop was merely an illustration to bidders of what stakeholders might want to identify when community services are planned and delivered. Tellingly, in documents from January, the CCG stipulated:

“Formal public consultation is not required as part of the procurement as no ‘significant variation’ to services is planned at this stage”.

Why is it being done if there is no significant variation to services?

All the documentation—approximately 300 pages in total—is hidden behind a portal, including more confidentiality agreements. The whole process appears so desperate to avoid the merest hint of engagement that it screams, “We’ve got something to hide!” It is utterly self-defeating, and serves no one well—not patients, bidders, the CCG or the community at large.

The CCG says that it is seeking a consistent service across all three areas and both acute trusts. Two of the CCGs and one of the trusts have been in deficit for years, and at various times in the past few years they have been on NHS Improvement's naughty step. The deficits are now being shared across the whole community.

The jam is being spread more thinly and differently from how it was spread before. The process is being embarked on to help spread the already struggling and inadequate level of service more thinly. Those service providers are spending money that should be spent on services on a process that I believe will inevitably reduce community services in Bristol.

I have great respect for the Minister, but I have no confidence that the Government will be able to make any difference to the local position. I hope that she takes note of the variability in how the rules are interpreted locally, as the Health and Social Care Committee noted in its response to the legislative proposals for the NHS long-term plan. Other commentators are saying the same. I hope the Minister will reflect on this local example. Will she explain directly or through her officials why, when I wrote to the Secretary of State about this originally, I got a reply from NHS Improvement? NHS Improvement is the provider regulator; this is a commissioning issue.

I believe that the Government should rapidly respond to the proposals to remove the requirement for competition under the section 75 regulations. There is no reason to wait; they need to get on with it. This saga shows that the lack of investment in NHS services remains a problem. Why not just build capacity rather than go through these expensive tendering processes with providers outside the NHS? I actually support the place-based approach to service provision in the NHS plan, but I object to the fact that this reprocurement goes counter to that plan.

At the very least, on behalf of local people, I would like the Minister to support my calls to see the proposals before contracts are signed for the next 10 years. We need a local plan and collaboration with the local authority that meets our health and social needs. I want a guarantee that people in south Bristol will not be worse off. Currently, no one can give me that.

4.17 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): It is a great pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Gapes. I thank the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) for securing this debate. She spoke passionately on behalf of her constituents. It is right to bring such concerns to this forum. She asked the questions that any good MP should ask, and she has the right concerns. She spoke strongly about valued local services that no one wants to see lost, such as her Healthier Together service, and said that she fears for their future. I hope that some of the things I shall say will allay her fears, but if I do not cover anything she mentioned, we shall write to her to give her as comprehensive a response as possible.

Community services play a vital role, but we have perhaps not emphasised them as much as we should have done in recent years and decades, so we must put that right. Effective community services mean that patients are treated where they are most comfortable—often their own home—and supported to manage their conditions and live independently. More widely, they are key to improving the patient experience. They provide preventative care and prevent people's illnesses and ailments from getting worse. Crucially, they prevent reliance on the big acute hospitals.

The NHS long-term plan sets out our vision for community services. It highlights the need to move away from small, narrowly defined and often poorly

[Caroline Dinenage]

co-ordinated community services to those which are more joined-up and operate over a larger footprint. It also encourages much longer commissioning times, to enable us to build the relationships that we want to continue to establish. Importantly, it will make it easier for patients to navigate the system without having to repeat their story multiple times, and will ensure that their care is delivered in a smoother, more timely manner. To help to deliver on that vision, as part of the extra investment in the NHS long-term plan, an extra £4.5 billion per year will be spent on primary medical and community health services by 2023-24.

That is why ideas such as this, from local areas such as Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire, which embed community services as a central component of their plan in a way that mirrors the vision of the NHS long-term plan, appear very attractive. By awarding all its adult community services in a single contract, we can see that the CCG is aiming to promote a cohesive, integrated approach, which will improve consistency and efficiency across its entire geography.

The CCG's 10-year funding approach also reflects the NHS long-term plan and will enable transformative change, through the kind of long-term relationships we need, based around strong, collaborative partnerships across not only the health and care system, but also the third sector, which the hon. Lady mentioned and which plays such a crucial part in the delivery of some of our most vital community services. We think that the length of the contract will allow the local area to design its services not only for the current need, but to address the future needs of its population, while also giving greater certainty to the workforce.

Additionally, the plans contain key commitments on community services set out in the NHS long-term plan. These include delivering care through multidisciplinary teams, the deployment of rapid response teams and providing services in central hubs located in people's communities, where they can get the holistic support that will enable them to stay healthy and well.

We think that all those things will ensure that patients receive timely, integrated and holistic care in their community, with a greater focus on treating the whole person rather than merely their condition. This approach will join everything together, so that people no longer slip through the gaps or get pushed from pillar to post or from A to B, and it will provide a one-stop shop where people have a named contact and a real integration of community, mental health and adult social care services and the third sector.

The hon. Lady spoke with great passion and knowledge about the importance of transparency and engagement when deciding service provision, something that of course I entirely agree with. At the same time, it is right that these decisions are made by local areas, such as CCGs, local authorities, sustainability and transformation partnerships or integrated care systems, because those people decide how services should be configured to meet the needs of their local area. When they do so, we have clear expectations of them: they must involve patients, carers and the public in decisions about the services they commission, and be clear and transparent about their decisions.

That could be where we appear to have a difference of opinion between how the hon. Lady feels that her CCG has communicated and the way the CCG feels that it has. I have spoken at length to the director of commissioning and the chief executive, who say that in this particular case they have made considerable efforts to meet those expectations. They report that they engaged with 500 local people, including health and care professionals and representatives from the third sector, and that patients and carers have been supported to engage with the process through a public reference group, which I know she mentioned.

Additionally, the CCG says that it has engaged with a range of organisations and partners from across the local system, including hospital and mental health trusts as well as local authorities, to better inform the contract process. Those organisations have met bidders for the contract to discuss service provision. The CCG says that that collaborative process will help the contract holders to build relationships and allow patients to receive integrated services, which is what we all want.

The CCG also says that it has taken steps to ensure a transparent process, including press releases, letters to stakeholders, engagement events and making key information available online. Additionally, the CCG reports that the procurement is being overseen by a programme board that includes patient and carer representatives.

The hon. Lady made the point that it might be premature to go out for tender while the NHS long-term plan's proposals for amending procurement requirements are being considered. That is a very good point, but unfortunately considerations around legislative changes do not change the CCG's duty to comply with current procurement law, nor do they change its duty to use its resources as efficiently and effectively as it can.

The CCG has agreed that if the legislation changes during the procurement process it will review and evaluate that process, but more widely, by law it must ensure that there is no gap in access to services. Its contracts for adult community services will expire in the coming years, and by law cannot be extended. The CCG has informed me that if the procurement was halted, it would create the risk that when the current contracts expired, local people would be left without vital community services, which the hon. Lady knows they rely on. Of course, that simply cannot happen.

The hon. Lady also rightly noted that we must ensure that contracts are given the necessary external support and scrutiny. To that end, NHS England's and NHS Improvement's integrated support and assurance process—for which we use another of those attractive acronyms, ISAP—provides a co-ordinated, consistent approach to reviewing complex contracts, which is intended to ensure that complex contracts are cost-effective, robust and in the interests of patients.

On 17 October, NHS England and NHS Improvement held an early engagement meeting with the CCG, where they discussed this contract under ISAP. Following that meeting, NHS England and NHS Improvement were assured of the need to have a single contract that runs for 10 years. A full ISAP process is triggered when a procurement is found to be sufficiently novel and complex. NHS England and NHS Improvement found that in this case these requirements were not met, meaning that the full ISAP process was not required. Instead, NHS

England and NHS Improvement regional teams will provide assurance that is informed by ISAP principles, which will include ensuring that the contract provides value for money, that it is centred around patient care and, crucially, that some of the key parts of patient care that the hon. Lady spoke about are not lost. The regional teams must also jointly ensure that the correct processes are followed, and that any chosen provider has the capacity and capability to deliver the services set out in the contract. Importantly, the regional teams must then give further formal, joint approval before the CCG can award a contract.

With that in mind, scrutiny of how we award contracts for delivery of health services is clearly vital. We must be assured that due care is taken so that patient outcomes are absolutely first and foremost, and that services are organised and delivered with prudent financial planning. To that end, NHS England and NHS Improvement will continue to closely monitor this contracting process. I welcome the close attention that the hon. Lady has paid to this contract; I know she has looked at it very thoroughly and I am grateful that she has raised her concerns. We believe that the CCG's approach in this case is right, but we will continue to engage in every way possible with all parties to help ensure its successful delivery.

Question put and agreed to.

Puffin Habitats

4.28 pm

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered puffin habitats.

It is a pleasure and an honour to be able to discuss the wonderful puffin here in Parliament. I have been trying to secure this debate for many months, as I have the great honour of being the MP who represents the largest proportion of the puffins who come to our shores every year along my exceptional, environmentally spectacular Northumbrian coast. Along those 64 miles of coast, within the boundaries of my constituency, can be found world-renowned habitats, which some of our planet's rarest, funniest, cutest and most determined birdlife choose to make home for their families every year. From Lindisfarne to the 28 Farne islands and down to Coquet island, my constituency welcomes kittiwakes, shags, guillemots, black-headed gulls, arctic, little and roseate terns—in fact, 95% of the UK population of roseates are found on Coquet island—and the majestic and unique puffin.

The puffin is only a little bird, about the same height as a long ruler, with a wingspan of two rulers. That is the measurement used by schoolchildren at one of my schools in Amble, the fishing port that hosts the Amble Puffin Festival every spring bank holiday. The puffin seems to wear a black coat and has a bright white chest, with spectacularly orange feet to match its large bill. Puffins look somewhat ungainly on the ground; they are a little bit awkward and shy. However, when they take off for flight, we see just why the Atlantic puffin—*Fratercula arctica*, or the friar of the Arctic, so named because of its monkish black hood—is to be respected. The puffin flies like a fighter jet, setting its beak at the front of a streamlined body with powerful wings, enabling it to head out from its cliff-top base to plunge up to 60 metres into the sea to source sand eels or sprats to feed their young.

In Northumberland, we use the puffin's arrival to the Farne islands and Coquet island as the harbinger of spring. The smallest of the world's four puffin species, our Arctic puffins, arrive en masse to breed on our most remote, unpeopled and predator-free islands. They come to land only for breeding, and they arrive at our Northumbrian coastline from across the vast northern seas where they live a solitary, invisible life on the wing following the previous breeding season.

Spring is carnival time for puffins. They get to the safe cliff tops on Inner Farne and some of the other 27 islands and turn from solitary birds to wildly social courting birds intent on finding a mate and creating the next generation of puffins. If they can meet up with their mate from the previous year, they often do. Once they have found a mate, their outsized beak and big, webbed feet set to work digging a burrow in the soft earth. The female lays just one egg, and the couple take turns incubating it under their wings in the burrow, out of sight of other birds.

Predators might be rats or cats, so the management of islands where puffins choose to breed, and where human activity has brought threats onshore, is vital to puffins' safety. The Farne islands are now managed by the National Trust and a team of rangers based on the

[Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

islands all summer to monitor and protect this vital habitat. The islands sit within the Northumberland marine special protection area and are now included in the latest set of UK conservation zones. The trust has monitored numbers on a five-yearly basis for decades, and the 2018 census showed some 44,000 pairs of puffins, up from 40,000 in 2013, so Northumberland colonies are in great health at the moment. The National Trust has been doing this monitoring for more than 50 years, which has helped us to keep abreast of colony size and to work out, where there have been drops, what might be causing them. It is great news that the trust now plans to monitor numbers formally on an annual basis to help inform the climate change debate as fully as possible.

Puffin parents share feeding duties, as they do incubation roles, although the female seems to make most of the trips—might that sound familiar, gentlemen? She will fly out from the island and dive for sand eels, coming back—as so many photos of our wonderful bird show—with a beakful of fish. She has to dodge the gulls, skuas and terns that would like to help themselves to her supplies. That fighter jet skill can be seen by visitors to the Farne islands, coming by boat from Seahouses, as puffins whizz past other species and come in to land—those big orange feet acting as brakes right next to the puffins' burrow—to deliver lunch to their baby puffling.

Beyond safe, predator-free habitats for burrows, the continued breeding health of the Arctic puffin is dependent on the state of the sea around the locations from which their food sources come. A plentiful supply of sand eels, sprats, baby herring or capelin is vital if the puffins are to breed. This critical factor was first demonstrated to me on the Farne islands, which my family and friends visit every spring to be amazed and awed by the influx of wildlife for the breeding season. Suddenly, one year, there just seemed to be fewer puffins. The breeding success rate was low. Locally, a sense of panic set in that it was all over for the puffin.

Thankfully, that was not the case. Rather, for reasons best known to the sea, there was a dearth of sand eels that year, and so the puffins simply did not breed, knowing that there was not enough food for their young. Nature's wildlife has a way of regulating itself for its own survival. Reassuringly, the numbers grew again in the years that followed, back up to the colony size we see now, as food supplies have remained abundant since that weird year.

The other direct threat to our puffins each year is stormy seas. I have been updated just today by one of our National Trust rangers, Gwen Potter—who looks after the Farne islands puffins and other nesting birds, such as my dear friend the eider duck—that a recent high tide and stormy sea came over the normal high water mark and drowned some 300 of our puffins and their baby pufflings just a few days ago. Some might say that that is just nature, and sometimes she is brutal, but how we manage our environment on a global scale, as well as a local one, remains a challenge.

While our UK puffin population is in rude health and we invest in looking after their unique habitats, around the world the Arctic puffin is not doing so well. In 2015, it was announced that the puffin is now classified as "vulnerable to extinction"; *Fratercula arctica* is now

on the red list. The Northumbrian monks of old, who communed with nature on Lindisfarne and the Farne islands—perhaps most famously St Cuthbert, who died on Inner Farne in 687 AD—would be horrified that we have failed to live in better harmony with nature in recent centuries.

Different breeding grounds, even around the UK, are in different states of health. Tagging and monitoring tells us that, from some breeding sites, puffins have to travel up to 400 km to find food for their young. Whether from overfishing, weather impacts altering water temperature and stormy sea levels, or food sources being much further away, we have trouble ahead. If the fish that puffins find are smaller because the temperature of the North sea shifts the sources of plankton that supply sand eels, more effort expended for less outcome can only have a detrimental impact.

I appreciate that the Minister cannot single-handedly restore our oceans and seas to balance and good health, and nor can he control the weather—I do not think—but we can, as a country and as a Government, ensure that we support those who manage puffin colonies with vermin control and good data monitoring, so that we can have an early and thorough understanding of causes of change or decline. I challenge the Minister to discuss the falling numbers of puffins in Norway and Iceland and whether it is acceptable anymore to eat puffins, since they are taken from breeding grounds.

While millions of birds sounds like a large number, it takes only a few years of poor breeding—there have now been nine years in Norway—for there to be a sudden and irreversible drop in numbers. The challenge of shipwrecks and oil spill impacts for food sources for many years is also a concern, and I ask the Minister to speak with his Department for Transport colleagues, who work globally to improve the safety of shipping activity.

As well as the opportunity to share the wonderfulness of another species centred in my beautiful constituency—hon. Members will recall our discussion on the eider duck, and I give many thanks to Ministers for including her in the list of protected birds in our new marine conservation zone—I hope this debate provides a good opportunity to highlight not only concerns that can be alleviated, at least in part, by local and national co-operation and forward planning, but some of the global risk factors, on which we must advocate, as a nation who lives by her word, as we move to a way of life that considers in the round the impacts we have on our wildlife.

4.37 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) for securing the debate.

Puffins are perhaps the most remarkably odd-looking birds to call the UK home. They look to have been drawn by a 1930s cartoonist, with a black-and-white body resembling a gent's evening attire that is augmented in the summer breeding season by a vibrantly coloured bill. Puffins are often referred to as sea parrots on account of those bright bills, and we in the UK benefit from more than 500,000 breeding pairs—roughly 10% of the world's population—although, as has been said, they are at risk. It is sad to note that, according to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, puffins are on

the red list, in need of urgent action to conserve them for future generations and to avoid the potential global extinction that has befallen other members of their extended family.

One of their habitats is off the beautiful Ayrshire coast in my constituency, on an island formed from a volcanic plug known as Ailsa Craig—a landmark famous for not only its birdlife but the blue granite used for the curling stones used throughout the world. These curling stones are manufactured in Mauchline in Ayrshire, albeit not in my constituency. When drivers head from Glasgow to Ayr on the A77, the island dramatically dominates the horizon for a moment and appears to travel with them on the coast road to Culzean castle.

On Ailsa Craig, puffins may nest either in sandy burrows vacated by rabbits or in crevices on the cliff-like ledges. Their ability to fly—rather clumsily at times—is outshone by their superb swimming and diving skills. Years ago, homeowners and tenants on the now uninhabited island had the right to take the island's birds for food and feathers. However, according to author and photographer Charles Kirk, who spent some time on the island, it took approximately 1,152 puffin feathers to make a bed—I have no idea who counted said feathers. Thankfully, the puffins are now protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Undoubtedly, the population has—excuse the pun—ebbed and flowed somewhat. Puffins start at a disadvantage, producing only one chick per breeding season, and although a puffin may live for 20 years or more, it does not breed for the first five years of its life. A lot of work was undertaken on Ailsa Craig to rid it of diseased rabbits and predatory rats, to encourage the puffin colony to multiply. Those animals, brought over on visiting boats and vessels, meant that, by the 1930s, puffin numbers had seriously declined. A concerted effort began, and I am pleased to note that, by 1991, the island was once again rat free, and puffins were returning in greater numbers to breed. We need to ensure that such predators do not again secure a foothold on the island and threaten its puffin colony.

Puffins are currently the subject of the RSPB's—this is hard to say—Puffarazzi project, a request for the public to submit photographs of feeding puffins. There has been a very positive response from the public. It is clear that these little and sometimes comical birds captivate us and are a huge draw for tourists. Indeed, the last ocean-going paddle steamer, the *Waverley*, used to offer trips around Ailsa Craig and out to Staffa for the public to view the puffin colonies and colonies of other seabirds. In the absence, for the moment, of the *Waverley*, Mr McCrindle, with his small vessel the *MFV Glorious*, offers wonderful trips from Girvan to Ailsa Craig—a magical trip that I have experienced many times.

Only at the end of last week, puffins were again in the news. The item referred to water temperatures rising with climate change, threatening the puffins' continued existence. Their mainstay diet of small fish such as herring and sand eels are themselves not exempt from environmental changes and human intervention, in addition to the ongoing problem of plastics polluting our seas.

I hope my right hon. Friend the Minister will be able to give us an assurance that when the Government address climate change and marine pollution, they will not forget not so much the flight of the puffin as the plight of the puffin.

4.41 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I commend and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) on securing this very interesting, useful and practical debate. On a day when so many of us, from across the House, have been meeting constituents and talking about the strategic challenge of climate change, we have an opportunity now to discuss one very small aspect of it that is nevertheless very important, because part of thinking about our responsibilities and responding to the challenge of climate change is thinking about what more we can do to protect our natural environment.

As my hon. Friends the Members for Berwick-upon-Tweed and for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) have demonstrated powerfully, our constituencies, and particularly the coastal constituencies in this country, are home to myriad fascinating and curious creatures—all kinds of wonderful wildlife—and the puffin has a place in our affections that probably few other birds do. That is very important for us in Pembrokeshire, where my own constituency is located. We have the island of Skomer, just off the coast of Pembrokeshire. Skomer is world famous among birdwatchers for being home to not just the puffin, but so many other species of seabird: Manx shearwaters, guillemots, razorbills and so on. Actually, this time of year is a wonderful time to visit Skomer. I would encourage you, Mr Gapes, and any other colleagues here this afternoon to do so. If you have not visited Pembrokeshire, you absolutely should, and if you have not been across to Skomer island, it is well worth it. There are boat trips six days a week to take people on to the island; it is a short boat ride across the choppy water, and at this time of year, when there are so many puffins breeding and some of the other species there, it truly is a sight to behold.

I want to use this opportunity not to repeat any of the incredibly effective descriptions that my colleagues have already given of the curious characteristics and the attractiveness of puffins, but just to flag up a couple of things in relation to Skomer island. First, I place on the record my thanks for the work of the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales. It manages the island of Skomer and does so extremely effectively. I have talked about the daily boatloads of visitors to the island; it caps them at 250 visitors a day. About 20,000 visitors a year go on to the island, and about 2,000 people will benefit from an overnight stay on the island. Many more people get to observe the island on boat trips where the boats do not land on the island itself. The puffin therefore plays an important economic role in my constituency by attracting tourists—not just from around the United Kingdom, but from all over the world—who want to come and see these very special seabirds in the wild.

With that comes a challenge. Yes, the wildlife trust's cap of 250 visitors a day is very important, but a warning has been flagged up recently about photographers. There is nothing more wonderful than going on to Skomer island with one's phone or a camera and trying to capture an image of one of these wonderful birds in the wild. They look stunning, they look curious and they are comical, as my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock—he is my good friend—mentioned a few moments ago. But that has meant that people have been striving harder and harder to capture a wonderful picture of the puffin, and unfortunately

[Stephen Crabb]

damage is being done to some of the burrows. It is unintentional. I do not think anybody would have a day trip out to Skomer with anything other than a desire to be a benign influence and not cause any harm, but incidental negative impacts do happen, so we have had a warning recently that photographers need to take care on the island. My hon. Friend mentioned the RSPB's Puffarazzi campaign, whereby it is encouraging people to go out and take photographs of puffins, especially puffins that are feeding, because although this bird has been watched and observed for years and years by so many people, there is so much that we do not know about the species. The RSPB is trying to learn more about the puffin's feeding habits and other behaviours, so it is encouraging members of the public to go and take pictures. But I would urge caution: photographers, both amateurs and professionals, need to take care.

We had a slight disruption to the overall growth in the puffin population locally in 2014, when we had a winter of very bad storms down in west Wales. Because of the weather patterns and the sea being churned up, puffins were literally starving. My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed said that nature has a wonderful way of self-regulating, and it is true. We have seen growth in the puffin numbers on Skomer island in Pembrokeshire. It is one of those places that is being observed more and more in order to understand why colonies can be so healthy and grow so much. In fact, the growth on Skomer has created challenges, because the puffins are now almost invading the space of the Manx shearwaters. Hon. Members may be able to imagine the tussle between those species, both of which we want to protect; we want them to flourish. All these things are being observed and watched, and where there is a need for human intervention, the wildlife trust does that very well.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed for securing the debate. It provides us with a useful opportunity to say some things that I hope will be constructive about this wonderful little species that enriches our lives and our nation in its own little way. I look forward to hearing the Minister's thoughts and ideas on what more can be done to ensure this species continues to grow in our country.

4.47 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I thank the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) for securing the debate. She represents an exceedingly beautiful constituency, and it is an absolute pleasure to pass through it by train on the way home. Many people admire the view of the area from the bridge; it always takes people aback.

The Atlantic puffin is widely distributed on islands around Scotland's north and west coasts, and to anyone wishing to have a great day at the seaside, I recommend the Firth of Forth, just off the coast at North Berwick, as a particularly interesting viewing point, where anyone can watch—the boat trip out to the Bass Rock may be just a wee bit better than the one at Ailsa Craig—the puffins, gannets and peregrine falcons, among many other birds, and seals feeding and going about their business. It is not too far from my Falkirk constituency, so it is worth the day trip.

Elsewhere in the UK, puffins can be found in northern England, in south-west England and in Wales, as has been said. The UK population is estimated to be about 500,000 birds, or perhaps more, and although the population is not under threat globally, some populations have suffered marked declines in recent years. With half the UK population nesting at only a few sites, it is sadly, as others have stated, an amber or a red list species in the UK.

Puffins spend most of their lives at sea, coming ashore only to breed; in Scotland, that takes place from late April until mid-August. Although the breeding birds have been well studied, much less is known about the birds' lives at sea in the winter. Population decline has been linked to changes in the numbers and distribution of their fish prey, probably caused by rising sea temperatures and the general mismanagement of the marine environment, and similar trends have been recorded in other UK seabirds.

Scotland's vital position at the edge of the north-west European continental shelf has a huge influence on our coast and seas. The Scottish Government are, of course, committed to the protection of that environment. The Scottish Government have added some 42 marine protected areas to their network since 2012 and have developed a strategy for the next six years, to provide continuity of development to that MPA network.

It is striking that, as is nearly always the case, the greatest threats to puffins are man-made. As we are aware, our marine environment has been shaped by wind, water and ice over thousands of years, creating productive and abundant marine life. The meeting and mixing of nutrient-rich waters provides the perfect home for sea life to thrive. Scotland is of international importance for its marine biodiversity, providing the ideal environment for our spectacular birds, marine mammals and fish, as well as for the habitats that are hidden on the sea bed.

A staggering 45% of Europe's breeding seabirds live in Scotland—around 5 million seabirds. Special protection areas are classified under the EU birds directive, which requires the member states of the European community to identify and classify the most suitable territories, in size and number, for certain rare or vulnerable species. SPAs are intended to safeguard the habitats of the species for which they are selected and to protect birds from significant disturbance.

The Scottish MPA network has changed considerably in recent years and now reflects the variety of life found in our seas. There are 217 sites in the Scottish MPA network, which protects 22% of our seas. Published guidance on how best to manage the puffins' habitat includes improved management of the marine environment for our fish, protecting their nest sites, controlling ground predators and reducing disturbance, as has been mentioned. Although puffin colonies are a big draw for tourists, visitor access needs to be controlled to minimise disturbance to parent puffins and prevent destruction of burrows by trampling. Scottish Environment Link asks Members of the Scottish Parliament to lend political support to the protection of Scotland's threatened wildlife by becoming species champions; the champion for puffins is Claire Baker.

Over the next six years, the focus will be on finishing ongoing actions to complete our Scottish MPA network, deliver any necessary management measures and continue the monitoring programme. The aim is to be able to report more authoritatively on MPA status in 2024. In order to complete the Scottish MPA network, nature conservation proposals are being progressed for sea

birds, including the very interesting development of a deep sea marine reserve to safeguard marine life that is under threat in deeper waters across the north-east Atlantic. In order to ensure that the MPA network is well managed, work is also ongoing to ensure that public authorities get clear advice to inform their decision making when an MPA may be affected.

When innovative approaches to MPA management planning are being trialled, it is extremely important to work with local communities and other stakeholders to develop them. The examples I have just given show excellent partnership and collaborative working practices. Marine Scotland is also leading a research programme that focuses on Scotland's seas. It includes work that the Scottish Government are funding to better understand the potential environmental impacts of marine renewable energy.

Puffins are an indicator species. While they are at risk from birds of prey, the biggest threats to their population are man-made. Pollution, overfishing and, perhaps most significantly, climate change are all reducing the population. I was struck by the comment made on the excellent BBC "Landward" programme by an RSPB warden in the Northern Isles at the weekend. Commenting on the distance that puffins have to travel for their food, she likened it to having to travel for Glasgow for her tea and then back again. That is not sustainable, and numbers will suffer.

To protect puffin habitats, we should remember that the world is given to us to till and nurture, not to own and plunder. That is a stark reminder of the responsibility of Governments around the world to protect the marine environment for the benefit of the wildlife for which it is home.

4.54 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate my friend, the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan). We largely co-operate on defence matters, but we can now add puffins to our areas of co-operation. I suspect we will both be speaking in the combat air strategy debate tomorrow; I like her analogy of puffins as fighter jets and I look forward to hearing her mention puffins in the debate on the Tempest programme tomorrow.

It is true that every bird matters, but as we have heard, every puffin matters, too. Before I get into the detail, I would like to share my favourite puffin story. As we have heard, we all have our favourite. Mine relates to the puffins on the Skellig islands, off the west coast of Ireland. Sci-fi nerds may already know what I am about to talk about. The Skellig islands were used as a filming location for "Star Wars: The Last Jedi". There were so many puffins as they were trying to film Luke Skywalker's last hangout that they could not airbrush the puffins out of the movie, so they decided to turn them into their very own Star Wars species and the porgs were born. Watching "Star Wars: The Last Jedi", Members will see plenty of porgs around Luke Skywalker's coastal hut—and they are indeed puffins. That is a bit of bedtime watching for the hon. Lady.

It is true, as we have heard, that human activity is affecting the habitats of many of our planet's valuable wildlife species. Through irreversible climate change, habitat destruction and biodiversity loss, we are making the survival of species that we love and appreciate

increasingly difficult. In a debate last month, we heard about the cruel practice of the netting of bird nesting sites, preventing sea birds from nesting on some cliff faces. In that debate I made it clear that we must not keep squeezing nature into smaller and smaller spaces. Given what we have heard about puffin habitats, they are already in very small spaces geographically.

Britain is home to around 10% of the world's puffin population, with nearly 600,000 breeding pairs, often found in clusters around the coastline of the British Isles. It is brilliant to hear of the experiences of various hon. Members with the puffin populations in their own part of the world. The right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) spoke about Skomer island. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) spoke about the west coast of Scotland. In the area that I represent, the south-west, we have puffin populations on Lundy island off the north coast and on the Isles of Scilly.

On Lundy we have had a similar experience to that mentioned by the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed in relation to tackling invasive species. On Lundy we are beginning to have a puffin comeback. After many years of puffins being on the brink of eradication, a programme to deal with the accidental introduction of rats from visiting boats has started showing good results. Thanks to the Lundy seabird recovery project, puffin numbers are now increasing. This is a great example of how targeted action can bring great results, correcting the damage that humans have done to these vital habitats.

Puffins are found in small clusters, which leaves them more susceptible to changes in local fish populations, as we heard from the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally). Puffins are on the RSPB's red list of conservation importance, which means that urgent action is needed to prevent their decline. In the Isles of Scilly, we have witnessed the success of the seabird recovery project—the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) is not present today, but he asked me to mention that on his behalf. That EU-funded project has done some great work in removing items of rubbish and in eradicating invasive species on the islands, leading to the fast recovery of the populations of the Manx shearwater and the puffin. Will the Minister, in his remarks, set out what plans the Government have to replace specific EU-funded schemes, such as that one, which deal with rare bird habitat protection?

The RSPB describes the main threat to puffins as a change in the distribution and numbers of small fish. Drastic changes in the numbers of small fish in the local area around puffin habitats can occur if there is increased pollution, as we have heard in the debate, whether from plastic or other pollutants such as oil. Overfishing in those areas also poses a threat, with sustainable fishing paramount for the survival of seabird species.

The Minister will be aware that his Conservative colleague the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) has tabled an amendment to the Fisheries Bill to ban sand eel fishing. As the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed noted, sand eels are a key part of a puffin's diet, so I would be grateful if the Minister set out the Government's position on sand eel fishing and on that amendment.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend have any thoughts about the additional assistance

[Melanie Onn]

that inshore fishermen could provide in making the environment for puffins free from pollution, and in supporting their habitats?

Luke Pollard: Yes. Fishers have several important roles to play, one of which is dealing with ghost gear. Although puffins are small birds, they are susceptible to eating plastic. Dealing with ghost gear—discarded fishing gear—is an important part of addressing that problem; I know that fishers in my hon. Friend's constituency and mine are taking steps to deal with it. Not only is it an expensive cost to the business, but it presents a real risk to wildlife and bird habitats. I urge my hon. Friend to keep encouraging fishers in her constituency to tackle plastic pollution, as I know she does already.

On the subject of plastic pollution, I must mention nurdles. Several hon. Members have noted incredibly worrying issues with puffins' diet and their ability to survive in the long term. As well as eating sand eels and other fish, puffins also eat plastic. A variety of studies of dead puffins washed up on the beach have found that, when cut open, their stomachs prove to be full of nurdles. Nurdles are small pieces of plastic that can be melted together to make larger items, but they are also a consequence of macroplastics being broken down. Puffins' stomachs, like those of other seabirds, are full of plastics, which prevent them from getting the necessary nutritional value from their food.

Just as we have a limited understanding of what puffins get up to at sea, we lack scientific knowledge about the effect of plastics on certain bird populations, of which puffins are a good example. I know that there has been much research in Scotland about seabirds and plastics, but I would be grateful if the Minister set out his vision for dealing with the scientific evidence base. If we had a true understanding of the effect of plastics on puffins and other seabirds, it would make it easier for the public to get behind action.

Seabirds are protected by a network of marine special protection areas, and I am pleased to hear that the Government have granted the application for such an area in the constituency of the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed. It is also good that the eider duck has been included among the protected bird species; I have heard the hon. Lady speak several times about its importance, and it should not be left out.

I would like a network of national marine parks to be created around the UK, which would provide an opportunity to put our complex system of protected marine areas into plain English. We already have a network of marine conservation zones, designated European marine sites and sites of special scientific interest—the list goes on. However, there are so many forms and designations of marine protection that it makes it harder for the public to access those sites. The Government's review of national parks gives us a real opportunity for the development of national marine parks. The Minister will know that Plymouth City Council is leading work, which enjoys cross-party support at a local level, to establish the first national marine park in Plymouth Sound. Protecting more marine areas would contribute to greater understanding and public awareness—the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire mentioned the Puffarazzi project—and would underline the importance of taking care when visiting puffin habitats.

I am very pleased that the House recently agreed to Labour's motion to declare a climate emergency, after an important debate that showed that this place is taking climate change seriously. I know that hon. Members from all parties will have visited climate change protesters at the Time Is Now climate protest today. Although we need to decarbonise our economy, we must not think of climate change as being only about carbon; we need to think equally about how to protect and conserve coastal habitats, bird nesting sites and feed, as we have heard today.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed for giving us a chance to tell our favourite puffin stories; I hope that more people will be able to do so over the weeks and months ahead. I know that the Minister has a full to-do list at his Department, but I hope that he will take seriously the concerns that have been voiced about our wonderful, brilliant, comical puffins, and take note that their decline is a sign of humanity's intervention regarding our wildlife. We need to do more to protect puffins, which will also save and protect other important habitats and seabird populations.

5.4 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) on finally securing this debate. I thank all hon. Members who have contributed.

The UK is particularly blessed with seabirds. Indeed, it hosts over half the seabirds in the European Union during the breeding season, with approximately 3.5 million pairs across 26 species. The debate has given us an opportunity to celebrate that rich diversity, from Ayrshire to Berwickshire to Pembrokeshire. I suggest that the best place to view puffins is probably at Bempton Cliffs, which hon. Members will not be surprised to hear is in Yorkshire.

The Atlantic puffin is one of the UK's most instantly recognisable and well-known seabirds. As our puffin champion, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), will attest, it is a creature close to our hearts. Its endearing features have been used as the symbol of children's books and to illustrate many stamps, and it was even one of the 10 shortlisted birds in the vote to find Britain's national bird—a contest that was eventually won by the robin.

I am species champion for the sand eel, so I am always nervous around my hon. Friend, given the proclivity of puffins to consume sand eels in large quantities. The sand eel is a species close to my heart, not least because of the work I did and the knowledge I gained in the European Parliament, looking at issues on the Dogger Bank, marine dredging and other forms of exploitation of sand eels that can have an effect on the environment if they are not done sustainably.

Puffins typically nest underground in burrows dug in the soil of offshore islands. They often mate for life, and pairs return to the same burrow year after year, if possible. The typical lifespan of a puffin is 18 years, but some have been known to live to 35. Sadly, the puffin is now listed as vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and its global population is in decline.

The puffin is doing well in the United Kingdom, however—particularly on Coquet island, which lies off the coast in the constituency of my hon. Friend the

Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed in Northumberland. Populations there have been gradually increasing since counts began in the 1980s. Indeed, populations in the north-east are generally considered to be stable, and the UK experienced an increase of almost 19% from 1988 to 2002. Considering that approximately 10% of the global puffin population breeds around Britain and Ireland, that stability is an important contribution to global numbers.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Atlantic puffins were heavily exploited for eggs, feathers and meat, causing a drastic reduction in populations and the elimination of some colonies. In England, puffins were considered a delicious food and were sold at the rate of three a penny. Since then, I am pleased to say that we have dramatically increased their protection.

Concerns were raised about the population in Norway. I plan to visit Norway over the summer, and that is one of the issues that I am likely to raise—along with the fact that, like Norway, we will very soon become an independent coastal state and be able to negotiate a better deal for the fishermen in the fantastic ports around our country, including in the constituency of the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn).

Our seabirds are protected principally by special protection areas set up under the wild birds directive, and by sites of special scientific interest set up under domestic legislation. SPAs protect areas identified as being of international importance for the breeding, feeding, wintering or migration of rare and vulnerable bird species found in Europe. There are currently 47 marine SPAs that protect seabirds in English waters.

England's largest breeding colonies of Atlantic puffin are found on the Farne islands and Coquet island, where populations have been increasing. The islands have been protected by SPAs since 1985, and puffins' foraging grounds were protected in 2017 as part of the Northumberland marine SPA. That is one of the most important sites in the UK for Atlantic puffin.

As well as using these protected waters for feeding during the breeding season, puffins and other species also use them for other important activities, such as preening, bathing and socialising. These activities are all part of the behavioural repertoire for which they need undisturbed waters. Protecting both their nesting sites and foraging grounds gives iconic species such as puffins the best possible chance of breeding.

Unfortunately, we know very little of the puffin's behaviour outside the breeding season. They are very difficult to monitor as they spend up to two thirds of their lives at sea. Those from north-western Britain disperse widely outside the breeding season, as far as Newfoundland in the west and the Canary Islands in the south. In contrast, most puffins from colonies in parts of eastern Britain, like Northumberland, remain within the North sea.

Puffins are a key part of the marine ecosystem and good indicators of the overall state of the marine environment, including the damaging effects of climate change. That is because their diet consists mainly of small fish, particularly sand eels, whose spawning season is affected by variations in sea temperature impacting upon their own prey of plankton. The puffin breeding cycle is less adaptable. If the sand eels are not available at the time that puffins are breeding, it affects how many birds breed and how many chicks they raise.

In 2000, our friends in the Scottish Government implemented a sand eel fisheries closure in an area off the east coast of Scotland to preserve this important food source for our seabirds. Other pressures on puffins related to climate change include the increasing frequency and intensity of storms, which have had a considerable impact. Indeed, in the winter of 2013-14 a succession of severe storms resulted in 54,000 seabirds being washed ashore, over half of which were puffins. This mass mortality had a serious knock-on effect on the breeding population.

As we have heard, puffins also suffer from the effects of pollution, particularly plastic pollution, and from predation by ground mammals such as rats. On Lundy island in the Bristol channel, the total population of puffins fell to just 13, largely due to rat predation. However, 15 years later and following the successful eradication of rats, the island's puffin population has come back to life, with numbers soaring to 375. Although that number may appear small when set against the UK's total population of 580,000 breeding pairs of puffins, these important birds produce only one puffling, or baby puffin, per year, and they are limited to a small number of breeding colonies. So protecting these sites is imperative.

To make sure that our puffins are sufficiently protected, my Department commissioned a review of the UK's terrestrial and coastal network of SPAs. I am pleased to note that the first phase of the review, published in October 2016, concluded that the SPA provision for puffin breeding is sufficient.

Puffins will indirectly benefit from this Government's plans in several other ways. Our 25-year environment plan sets out how we will fulfil our ambition to leave the environment in a better state than we found it, building on existing strategies and identifying key areas of focus. We want even cleaner air and water, richer habitats for more wildlife, and an approach to fishing, agriculture and land use that puts the environment first.

Globally, less than 10 per cent of the world's seas are currently designated as marine protected areas, which is one of the most important ways to protect precious sea life and habitats from damaging activity. However, at home in our waters, we are at the forefront of establishing marine protected areas. We are committed to delivering a well-managed blue belt of protection around our coasts, and 40% of English waters are within marine protected areas. Just a few weeks ago, we created 41 new marine conservation zones, marking the most significant expansion of England's blue belt to date. Within these zones, we are protecting species and habitats, such as the rare stalked jellyfish, the short-snouted seahorse and blue mussel beds. Two species of seabird are also being protected in these marine conservation zones: razorbills, off the Cumbrian coast; and eider ducks, along the Northumbrian coast. We discussed this protection in the previous debate on seabirds, which my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed also secured.

Overall, the UK now has 355 marine protected areas of different types, including SPAs, spanning 220,000 sq km, which is an area nearly twice the size of England. However, we are not stopping there. We recently announced a review to examine whether and how highly protected marine areas could be introduced for English seas. These are the strongest form of marine protection, which would stop all human activity that has the potential

[*Mr Robert Goodwill*]

to cause harm in vulnerable areas. This review is being led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) and a panel of independent experts. It aims to establish criteria for designation and it will potentially recommend up to five pilot sites.

Of course, our blue belt would be meaningless without appropriate management measures to protect the sites. For example, activities that are damaging, such as the use of bottom-towed mobile gear, would either not be allowed or—if possible—adapted to allow them to continue in a way that does not damage habitats and enables sites to meet their conservation objectives. Regulators, such as the Marine Management Organisation and the Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities, are responsible for making sure that no damaging activities take place in marine conservation zones, using a combination of byelaws and voluntary measures. These regulators will monitor marine activities to make sure that these measures are being followed.

We are a global leader in protecting the marine environment. Our updated UK marine strategy will include targets to ensure that good environmental status is achieved for seabirds, and it will also set the indicators we use to assess seabirds' status and identify the pressures affecting them. We will continue to protect marine birds, for example, by reducing the risks to island seabird colonies from invasive predatory mammals, such as rats, by delivering the UK plan of action on seabird bycatch, and by reducing marine litter. The UK has a well-respected bycatch monitoring programme in place, which is run by the Sea Mammal Research Unit. The data that is gathered is currently being used to conduct a preliminary assessment of the extent of seabird bycatch across the UK, which will inform the initial focus of our plan of action.

As we have heard, plastic in the seas is a hazard for seabirds. I was pleased to take part in a debate here in Westminster Hall on packaging on Monday, which was secured by the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner). Evidence shows that marine birds, particularly diving birds, can be injured or even killed by abandoned, lost or discarded fishing gear. Diving birds may become entangled in such gear when chasing fish, becoming trapped underwater and drowning. Indeed, as we heard from the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), the scourge of micro-plastics and nurdles impacts upon a whole variety of species, including puffins and other seabirds.

In 2017, the UK signed up to the Global Ghost Gear Initiative, a pioneering scheme to tackle lost and abandoned fishing gear on a global scale. Through this initiative, we are committed to working with our partners to address the management of existing fishing gear, and the mitigation of the potential effects of abandoned, lost and discarded fishing gear. In addition, the UK continues to lead the way in tackling the scourge of plastic pollution entering our oceans.

We recognise the importance of protecting the marine environment and we see the health of the ocean as key to tackling climate change. We have already exceeded the current global sustainable development goal to protect 10% of our marine and coastal areas by 2020, with 25% of UK waters currently protected. At the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2018, the

Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs called for 30% of the world's oceans to be marine protected areas by 2030.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed will be pleased to hear that we are extremely committed to protecting the marine environment as we leave the EU. Through the EU (Withdrawal) Act, we will make sure that marine protected areas set up under European directives, including SPAs, will continue to be effectively protected post exit. The Office for Environmental Protection will monitor and report on our progress, holding the Government to account. After we have left the EU, we will be able to manage our marine environment in a more dynamic and flexible way than is possible under the common fisheries policy. Using powers that we are seeking through the Fisheries Bill, the Marine Management Organisation will be able to apply byelaws to manage the resources of sea fisheries for conservation purposes throughout English waters.

I now turn to one or two of the points made by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport. He talked about disturbance of seabirds. That brought to mind an experience I had when visiting Immingham, which is not far from the constituency of the hon. Member for Great Grimsby, where I visited an oil refinery. I was told that it was probably the best habitat for a number of seabirds, because there were lots of things to perch on, such as fences and pipes, but I was told that the most important aspect was that there were virtually no people and in particular no dogs whatsoever.

We need to be very thoughtful about how we allow access to some of these marine protected areas, in the same way that we are in some of our national parks and other areas on land. Yes, it is great to have more public access, but we must ensure that the people who gain that access understand the effect they can have. Indeed, we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) how well-meaning visitors can sometimes cause damage.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport asked me in particular about the funding of environmental schemes. We are a net contributor to the European Union, so there will be scope for innovative and UK-centric schemes, and I can reassure him that there will be no changes to funding. In particular, he mentioned the scourge of plastics, an issue on which we need to take global action. I was recently talking to a friend in my constituency who had been on holiday to Vietnam, and sailing down the coast he saw three separate locations where whole truckloads of plastic and other rubbish were being tipped straight into the sea. We in this country take plastic pollution very seriously, and important moves have been made to address plastic straws and other types of pollution and litter. However, looking around the world, we see some egregious examples of how pollution can cause problems.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned sand eels, which I would like to say a little bit about, because they are an important component of marine food webs that provide food for many species of marine predator, such as seabirds, mammals and fish. The sand eel life cycle is affected by climate change, as warmer seas have a direct effect on plankton. The puffin breeding cycle is less adaptable, so if the sand eels are not available at the time puffins are breeding, that affects how many birds

breed and how many chicks they raise. We also know that that varies annually, and in different parts of the country.

The RSPB's citizen science project, Puffarazzi, is currently collecting data on puffin diet to complement research being done by several academic groups, which will give us an insight into puffins' current diet and changes over time. There is some evidence that the exploitation of sand eels affects the wider ecosystem, such as causing a decline in seabird populations. For example, a recent study has found a correlation between kittiwake breeding success and sand eel fishing mortality, although there are many other factors that could have an impact on small fish populations, such as climate change.

The UK does not have a strong commercial interest in sand eels, although we have some quota that is fished occasionally. Most of the fishing of sand eels in UK waters is by the Danish fleet, although Sweden has a commercial interest. Fishing is concentrated around Dogger Bank, which in most years accounts for over 90% of sand eels caught in the UK's exclusive economic zone. Sand eels are a quota species; the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea provides annual recommendations on the total allowable catch for sand eel in management area 1r, Dogger Bank. In recent years, with the exception of 2016, the TAC has been set in line with ICES' recommendations. However, catches have often exceeded that TAC.

Sand eels are not used for direct human consumption, but their fishery provides livestock and aquaculture feed and fertiliser. Arguably, alternative ways to produce those goods that should not interfere with marine ecosystems and food webs would be more sustainable; however, we do not currently have evidence on whether production of alternative feed stocks and fertilisers would actually have a lower overall environmental impact. A sand eel fishery closure has been in place off the east coast of Scotland since 2000. It is prohibited to land or

retain sand eels on board within the closure area, although a limited scientific fishery is permitted to monitor the stock.

Again, I thank hon. Members for contributing to the debate. I emphasise that we are a world leader in protecting our precious coastline, and we continue to increase protection in the UK to safeguard our puffins' future. The relatively new Northumberland marine SPA is a welcome addition to that suite. With rising populations in some colonies, the UK continues to play its part in improving the chances of one of our most vulnerable and iconic species.

5.22 pm

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive and detailed response to today's debate. I look forward to the challenge of long-term rebalancing, through which we will have the opportunity to manage our waters and think in a much more holistic way than perhaps the common fisheries policy has given us the opportunity to do. I very much hope that we will be able to work together as we go forward, so that we can genuinely be a world-leading country in understanding that balance of decision making and ensuring we support those who work in our seas alongside those who look after our natural wildlife.

In the long term, we often discover that plants and animals that we did not appreciate before have a greater value holistically to our natural habitat, of which we are a part, than we perhaps understood. I thank the Minister very much for his detailed responses, and look forward to working with him on this issue in the months and years ahead.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered puffin habitats.

5.24 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 26 June 2019

CABINET OFFICE

EU Exit Preparedness

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): While the Government believe that leaving the EU with a deal is the best outcome, leaving without a deal remains the legal default at the end of the extension period on 31 October 2019. As a responsible Government, we have been preparing to minimise any disruption in the event of a no deal scenario for over two years and are continuing with these preparations. This statement is intended to provide the House with an update on these preparations.

We have published approximately 750 pieces of communications on no deal since August 2018, including 106 technical notices explaining to businesses and citizens what they need to do to prepare. Our advice covers a wide range of information, from maintaining funding for EU-funded programmes to driving in the EU after exit. To provide further advice, we have also contacted businesses directly—for example about 145,000 businesses that trade with the EU—to help them get ready for no deal customs procedures.

Since an extension to article 50 was agreed between the UK and the EU, the Government have continued to prepare for no deal. We continue to lay statutory instruments to ensure a functioning statute book by exit day. Since 12 April the Government have laid statutory instruments to address deficiencies in retained EU law in areas such as the environment, aviation safety, emissions trading and Euratom. The Government will continue to bring forward further statutory instruments to ensure we are fully prepared for exit.

We have signed a number of trade continuity agreements, including with Switzerland, a key trading partner. In addition to these signed agreements, the UK has also reached an agreement in principle with South Korea on the terms of a continuity trade agreement, through which businesses will be able to continue to benefit from existing trade arrangements. Once that agreement is signed, the UK will have signed agreements with countries that account for 63% of the UK's current trade with those countries for which the UK is seeking continuity.

Guaranteeing the supply of critical “category 1” goods, including medicines, medical products, veterinary medicines and chemicals remains an essential element of the Government's no deal contingency planning. The Government are therefore undertaking steps to secure freight capacity for suppliers of these goods in a no deal scenario.

The Department of Health and Social Care is starting the process of setting up an express freight contingency arrangement to support continuity of supply of medicines and medical products. This will be an urgent contingency measure for products requiring urgent delivery, within a 24 to 48 hour timeframe, if the UK leaves the EU without a deal. This express freight contingency arrangement forms part of the Department's multi-layered approach, which includes rerouting medical supplies

from the short strait crossings, extra warehouse space, stockpiling, buffer stocks, clarifying regulatory requirements, supporting traders to have all necessary paperwork in place at the border, and strengthening the processes used to deal with shortages to ensure that patients have uninterrupted access to medicines and medical products if the UK leaves the EU without a deal. Government will only pay for capacity as and when it is needed and used. This will be designed to cover all of the UK. The Department will be writing to industry to set out further details of these preparations.

The Department for Transport is putting in place a freight capacity framework agreement that will provide Government Departments with the ability to secure freight capacity for our critical supply chains as and when required. This framework does not commit the Government to purchasing or reserving any freight capacity, but it does provide a flexible list of operators and options for the provision of the capacity that can be drawn upon if needed.

In the coming months, the Government will make further announcements on their preparations for a possible no deal exit on 31 October, including on trade continuity agreements to limit disruption to our trade with third countries after we leave the EU.

Many of the most important mitigations require businesses and citizens to act. There have been hundreds of meetings at ministerial and official level to discuss preparedness with businesses and civil society groups. The Government will continue to engage with stakeholders across the UK to ensure they are ready for all scenarios. We have published extensive advice on the steps that businesses and citizens may need to take to prepare for our exit from the EU, which is available on www.gov.uk/euexit.

[HCWS1661]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable Development Goals: Voluntary National Review

The Secretary of State for International Development (Rory Stewart): The Government have today published the United Kingdom's first voluntary national review of progress towards the sustainable development goals (also known as the global goals). We are proud of what we have achieved but humbled by what we have not. It is not an end in itself but rather has taught us about what we must do better. It balances achievements with shortcomings and, most importantly, outlines next steps.

In September 2015, the 193 member states of the United Nations agreed the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development, including the 17 global goals (the goals). This ambitious agenda sets out the framework through which the world will work together to combat the most pressing challenges of our time, including eradicating extreme poverty, ending hunger, protecting our environment and breaking down gender barriers. These goals apply to all people in all countries, including here in the UK.

The goals are not just about doing more, they are about protecting what we have: protecting the environment, protecting heritage, protecting communities, protecting health and wellbeing, protecting the rights of vulnerable groups, and protecting our planet.

Our voluntary national review sets out the collective efforts of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland on the goals since their adoption in 2015. It covers domestic and international work across all 17 goals, with a focus on the domestic. It has been produced through collaboration with, and input from, numerous UK Government Departments and the devolved Administrations. Additionally, over 380 organisations from civil society, the private sector and faith groups, as well as many individuals, have been engaged.

While we have made significant progress and have strong foundations on which to build, there is more work to do if we are to meet the ambitious targets by 2030.

Conducting our voluntary national review has further deepened our respect and understanding of the global goals and stiffened our resolve to leave no one behind. I am grateful to all those who contributed to the review. Electronic copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The review is available at www.gov.uk/sustainabledevelopmentgoals

[HCWS1660]

JUSTICE

Law Commission Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard): As part of its efforts to make the UK the safest place online in the world, the Prime Minister announced in February 2018 that the Law Commission was to review the current law around abusive and offensive online communications and highlight any gaps in the criminal law which cause problems in tackling this abuse. This commitment also stemmed from the work by the Committee on Standards in Public Life into intimidation in public life (a review which, in turn, was commissioned by the Prime Minister).

The Law Commission published phase 1 of their review of Abusive and Offensive Online Communications on 1 November 2018. Its scoping report can be found online at:

<https://www.lawcom.gov.uk/abusive-and-offensive-online-communications>

I would like to inform the House that the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport have now engaged the Law Commission on a second phase of their review of Abusive and Offensive Online Communications.

This work will begin in July 2019 and will build on the analysis undertaken by the Law Commission as part of phase 1 of this review. This found that while abusive online communications are in general criminalised to the same degree as equivalent offline offending, there remains considerable scope for reform—in particular, around the nature of some behaviour in the online environment, and the degree of harm it can cause.

As part of phase 2, the Law Commission will also consider the criminal law around the non-consensual taking and sharing of intimate images. The review will look at existing offences—for example section 33 of the Criminal Justice and Courts Act, which captures the non-consensual disclosure of intimate images with the intent to cause the victim distress—and identify whether there are any gaps in the scope of the protection already offered to victims, making recommendations to ensure that the criminal law provides consistent and effective protection against the creation and sharing of intimate images without consent. This honours the commitment given in the Commons by the hon. Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer) during the passage of the Voyeurism (Offences) Act 2019.

In parallel with this, the Law Commission will review the current communications offences (including section 127 of the Communications Act 2003 and section 1 of the Malicious Communications Act 1988) to establish whether the law is fit for purpose, and make specific recommendations about options for reform in this area. Alongside this, the Law Commission will also consider whether co-ordinated harassment by groups of people online could be more effectively dealt with by the criminal law.

The two strands will be concluded in a joint report, due to be published in spring/summer 2021.

A copy of this statement will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1659]

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 26 June 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
PRIME MINISTER	649	WALES—continued	
Engagements	649	Former Phurnacite Works, Abercwmboi	647
WALES	639	Industrial Strategy	643
Assembly Members: Diplomatic Support	649	Infrastructure Resilience	644
EU Withdrawal Agreement: Welsh Economy	641	Leaving the EU: Manufacturing	639
Ford in Bridgend: Welsh Economy	646	Mid-Wales Growth Deal	647
		Steel Producers	646

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 26 June 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE	33WS	JUSTICE	35WS
EU Exit Preparedness	33WS	Law Commission Review	35WS
INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	34WS		
Sustainable Development Goals: Voluntary National Review	34WS		

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**not later than
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CONTENTS

Wednesday 26 June 2019

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 639] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Wales
Prime Minister

Animal Welfare (Sentencing) [Col. 668]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Football Regulation [Col. 669]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Christian Matheson)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Opposition Day [Unallotted half day]

Immigration [Col. 673]

Motion—(Stuart C. McDonald)—agreed to

Armed Forces Day [Col. 726]

General debate

Petitions [Col. 768]

Disabled Access: Thirsk Station [Col. 770]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

NHS Pensions [Col. 309WH]

Heated Tobacco [Col. 330WH]

EU Structural Funds: Least Developed Regions [Col. 336WH]

Adult Community Services [Col. 362WH]

Puffin Habitats [Col. 370WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 33WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
