

**Thursday
4 July 2019**

**Volume 662
No. 325**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 4 July 2019

House of Commons

Thursday 4 July 2019

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was asked—

Youth Services

1. **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): When the Government plan to review their guidance on the statutory duty for local authorities to provide youth services. [911737]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): We are pleased to announce that we will be reviewing the guidance as part of the civil society strategy published last year, and we still anticipate launching the review before the summer recess. In fact, I hope to do it next week.

Alex Norris: Up and down the country, there is less and less for our young people to do. The Government's own civil society strategy says that youth work and youth services can be "transformational", so why has funding for them fallen by 70% since 2010?

Mims Davies: This Government are committed to supporting youth activities and our young people. In fact, I have had several meetings just this week on the youth charter and our vision for young people over the next 10 years. The National Lottery is supporting positive activities for our young people through £80 million of funding, and of course we have the National Citizen Service.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Government's serious violence strategy rightly placed programmes for young people at its heart. Will the Minister assure the House that that strategy is going to start delivering those projects on the ground, to divert young people away from gangs and crime?

Mims Davies: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. The Secretary of State and I were part of the Prime Minister's summit on serious violence in April this year. It is right that we take a multi-agency approach to tackling knife crime and serious violence. The Government are investing £200 million in the youth endowment fund to support interventions with young people, and particularly those who are at risk.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): On Independence Day, may I congratulate all my American cousins on this fine day when they broke away from Britain? I still have my green card from when I emigrated.

Youth services should learn from what is done in the best cities in the United States. It is high time that we put proper Government resources into youth services and stopped relying on charities, although partnerships are good. The fact of the matter is that in most constituencies, youth services are on their knees.

Mims Davies: I thank our charity sector for the work that it does in this area. The hon. Gentleman is right that we should not rely on charities, although we must learn from and listen to them, and listen to young people. In terms of lessons from America, one issue that came up in the knife crime summit was that particular social media platforms are allowing groups to come together, organise and cause more problems on our streets. This Department is determined to ensure that we work together, in both my sector and that of my hon. Friend the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries, to support and keep our young people safe.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I agree that local authorities have a role to play in youth services, as well as the charitable and voluntary sector, but does the Minister agree that the private sector also has a role? In my neighbouring constituency of Grimsby, a youth zone is being proposed, funded by local entrepreneurs. Does she agree that that is one way forward?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for raising entrepreneurship, which seems to be a theme in our party at the moment. Looking again to America, we can and must learn from altruism and philanthropy. I thank people for giving directly back to their community, which we encourage in the civil society strategy.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I am delighted to see so many of my former Whips Office colleagues, including the Chief Whip, in the Chamber to hear me speak at the Dispatch Box for the first time—no pressure.

UK Youth, a leading national charity, estimates that the National Citizen Service underspent by more than £50 million this year. Many organisations are desperate to support our young people. Will the Minister explain what plans the Government have to reallocate the underspend to the many fantastic charities that support our wonderful young people?

Mims Davies: I welcome the hon. Lady to her post. I know that she is very passionate about this area and was part of our knife crime summit in April. I met UK Youth and the NCS yesterday as part of our youth charter work. Work is going on with the Treasury to ensure that all our youth sector is supported, including through the underspend of the NCS.

Superfast Broadband: Rural Areas

2. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What recent progress his Department has made on increasing access to superfast broadband in rural areas. [911738]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The Government's superfast broadband programme has met its target and is now providing superfast coverage to 97% of premises, including 94.8% of premises in my hon. Friend's constituency. In addition, we have just launched the rural gigabit connectivity programme, with £200 million of funding, to begin to deliver even faster, gigabit speeds to the most remote and rural parts of the UK.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Clearly, improved access to superfast broadband in places such as Shropshire will reduce the number of car journeys needing to be made. What assessment has her Department made of that improvement in helping us to reach the net zero carbon contribution target we have set?

Margot James: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Although we have not conducted a specific study on the environmental impact of faster broadband speeds, we have considered it as part of a wider evaluation. We have found that the use of cloud computing has an effect in reducing commuting time, and we will be exploring this more specifically in our superfast broadband programme evaluation next year.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): May I ask the Minister, in using the word "rural", not to forget communities in the south Wales valleys that can be quite socially isolated? Will she set out what funding she will put in place to deal with the geography of some of the south Wales valleys, which are still suffering with painfully slow broadband?

Margot James: I think the hon. Gentleman asked me a similar question last summer, and I am delighted to say that his intervention last year led directly to my recommending to the Chancellor that he include the Welsh valleys in the first pilot of the roll-out of the rural gigabit connectivity programme, so the hon. Gentleman can hold us to that. I also want to mention that the voucher scheme has been enhanced, so that small and medium-sized enterprises in the Welsh valleys will now get access to a voucher worth £3,500 and residents a voucher worth £1,500 to connect on to the public buildings that the programme will connect.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): In my hon. Friend's excellent work in rolling out broadband to rural areas, will she ensure that we do not inadvertently neglect urban and semi-urban areas in the London borough of Bromley? Areas around Down and Farnborough village have woeful access and, sadly, BT does not have plans to roll out the fibre needed to upgrade it. Could she possibly help?

Margot James: I will certainly help my hon. Friend. He points out that suburban and urban areas have a really worrying lack of access not so much to superfast, but certainly to decent speeds. We are incorporating those via incentives to the private sector to connect. That is now going very well indeed, with Openreach alone connecting 20,000 premises a week.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): As more and more of our banks are closing branches across the country, it is becoming vital for people, particularly in

rural areas, to have access to online facilities and good broadband. The way this has been rolled out, particularly in Scotland, has not suited rural communities. Can the Minister assure me that there will be discussions with the Treasury, the Scottish Government and the local authorities that will be involved in the future to ensure that our communities in Scotland actually get a better service and are able to access finances?

Margot James: I sympathise with the hon. Lady. Unfortunately, there have been appalling delays to the procurement system underpinning the Scottish Government's R100—Reaching 100%—programme. I am reliably informed that they are almost at the end of that process and that they are about to award contracts this autumn. It has been a painful process, but my officials have been discussing it with the Scottish Government, and I am confident that it will be improved. We also have programmes from my Department that are already rolling out in Scotland.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister will be aware that, under the confidence and supply agreement with the Democratic Unionist party, the Government have set aside some hundreds of millions of pounds for rural broadband across all of Northern Ireland. What discussions has she had with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in Northern Ireland to ensure that that rural broadband roll-out is completed?

Margot James: I know that in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and in the rest of Northern Ireland there has obviously been a delay in deploying that budget on account of there being no Government in Northern Ireland. My officials are in discussions with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to ameliorate that situation, and I will write to him with the latest details.

Algorithms: Inappropriate Use

3. **Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to tackle the potential inappropriate use of algorithms in the (a) public and (b) private sector.
[911739]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): We have asked the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation to review the potential for bias in the use of algorithms, and it is considering usage in both the public and private sectors on crime and justice, financial services, recruitment and local government. The centre will publish an interim report later this month, and it will make recommendations to the Government early next year. We will then decide how to proceed.

Chi Onwurah: The past 10 years have seen the most revolutionary and rapid changes in how technology is used in public services, politics, work and leisure, yet the Government have had to be dragged kicking and screaming to implement the most basic digital protections, and they are behind even Google and Facebook in calling for regulation. The Secretary of State talks about another review, but algorithmic bias is a threat to all our citizens in the form of algorithmic rule. Will he take the opportunity to get on the front foot and put in place regulations to protect our citizens?

Jeremy Wright: We are on the front foot, and the hon. Lady's characterisation is entirely wrong. The world looks to the UK as a leader in this field. I talk to counterparts across the world about the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation, and they are interested in a move that we are making that no one else has yet made. As the hon. Lady knows—she has looked carefully at this issue—the online harms White Paper will deal with a range of issues and produce regulation that is, once again, world leading.

TV Licences for Over-75s

4. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): If he will support the maintenance of free TV licences for the over-75s. [911743]

8. Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): If he will make it his policy to maintain free TV licences for the over-75s after 2020. [911747]

9. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): If he will support the maintenance of free TV licences for the over-75s. [911748]

11. Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): If he will make it his policy to maintain free TV licences for the over-75s after 2020. [911750]

13. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): If he will make it his policy to maintain free TV licences for the over-75s after 2020. [911752]

14. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): If he will make it his policy to maintain free TV licences for the over-75s after 2020. [911753]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): The Government are disappointed with the BBC's decision on the licence fee concession for the over-75s. Taxpayers want the BBC to use its substantial licence fee income in an appropriate way, to ensure that it delivers for UK audiences. The Government expect the BBC to consider further ways to support older people, and I recently met the BBC management to discuss what more it could do.

Gavin Newlands: The BBC is not a benefits agency. Both Tory leadership contenders have condemned the proposal to remove free TV licences from the over-75s, and stated that that must be reversed. The director-general has rightly said that the Government are responsible for the TV licence proposal, and that he would be open to conversations about reversing it. Will the Secretary of State tell the House when further conversations may happen, and when will that benefit cut be reversed?

Jeremy Wright: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the decision to transfer that responsibility to the BBC was taken in 2017 by this House in the Digital Economy Act 2017. I assure him that conversations about what more we expect of the BBC will continue, and we expect it to do more.

Jessica Morden: Without hiding behind the BBC again, will the Minister explain to my constituent, who rang up incensed, why his 86-year-old neighbour, who is

a veteran and relies on his TV for company, should have his TV licence taken away? Last week the Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ellwood), who opened the debate on Armed Forces Day, thought that was unfair—does the Minister?

Jeremy Wright: Nobody is hiding behind the BBC. Legislation has now provided that this decision should be for the BBC to take, and if the hon. Lady listens to the BBC, that is exactly its message—it is its decision and responsibility. She makes a good point about veterans, and I have raised that issue with the BBC. I expect it to be able to do more for veterans, and it should.

David Linden: In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) the Secretary of State referred to 2017, but in that year his party's manifesto stated that there would be no cut to free TV licences. On Monday, people in Duke Street were infuriated by that move. There are 6,500 over-75s in my constituency. Will the Minister come and visit and tell them why he is planning to cut their free TV licence?

Jeremy Wright: I am happy to send the message that I share their disappointment, and I have made that clear on a number of occasions. In fact, we can go back further than 2017, because in 2015 the arrangement was made with the BBC that this responsibility would transfer to it as part of the charter settlement. The BBC has known about this for some time, and it had the opportunity to prepare for it. In our view, it needs to do better.

Rosie Duffield: In my constituency of Canterbury, there are some 6,250 households at risk of losing their free TV licence. Why are the Government failing to live up to their responsibility to older residents? Is it simply the case that they are entirely complacent about receiving their support in any upcoming general election?

Jeremy Wright: No, I do not accept that for one moment. The Government's record on support for older people has been remarkable. We have been able to provide £1,600 more per year for those on the state pension than was managed in 2010 under a Labour Government. We have done more on loneliness than any Government before us. We introduced a Minister with responsibility for tackling loneliness. For the first time, we have a strategy on loneliness and we have put our money where our mouth is with £20 million of investment. I am afraid the Labour party in government did none of those things.

Mr Jim Cunningham: If it was a decision for the BBC, why did the Government put it in their manifesto? Does the Minister not think he has a moral obligation to make up the difference if the BBC has a problem? Many pensioners suffer from loneliness and for them the BBC is a lifeline to the world.

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of loneliness, and I will repeat the points I have just made. The Government have done a huge amount to combat this very substantial social problem. The truth is that we still expect the BBC to do better in this area, but it is the BBC's responsibility. The responsibility

was transferred to the BBC in 2017, after it was agreed with it in 2015. The BBC itself has made it clear that this is now its responsibility.

Daniel Zeichner: In the London *Evening Standard* on 11 June, there was a very interesting headline on page two, stating:

“Tax campaigners defend axing of free TV licences for wealthy OAPs”.

Wealthy old-age pensioners? Will the Secretary of State join me in condemning the slippery language used by the editor of the London *Evening Standard*, an architect of this debacle? My 5,000 pensioners who risk losing their free TV licence in Cambridge are not wealthy.

Jeremy Wright: As the hon. Gentleman says, wealthy pensioners are not the only ones who will lose their TV licence. That is certainly right. That is exactly why we continue to say to the BBC that it needs to do better than it is doing at the moment.

There are some very interesting statistics that I should perhaps share with the House at this point. Last year and this financial year, the BBC has been sharing with the Government the cost of the over-75 licence concession. Last year, the cost of the concession was £677 million. The Government paid £468 and the BBC paid £209 million. This financial year, the cost is £700 million. The Government paid £247 million and the BBC paid £453 million. The cost of the concession as the BBC intends to operate it from 2020 onwards is, by its estimate, £260 million. That is substantially less than the BBC is paying towards the concession this financial year. The BBC would say, and I would agree with it, that it is able to supply a good service this year while still paying £453 million towards that concession. That seems to be an interesting statistic.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Why not get rid of TV licences altogether for everyone and force the BBC to compete for its revenues like every other broadcaster? The supermarket equivalent would be forcing everyone, under threat of criminal sanction, to spend £150 in Tesco even if they shop at Aldi, Sainsbury's, Co-op or elsewhere.

Jeremy Wright: I cannot agree with my hon. Friend. In previous years we looked carefully at whether this is the right way to fund the BBC, and the conclusion reached was that it is. The Government have no plans to change that fundamental funding model.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Does the law allow the BBC to discriminate? If it does, should it not be the BBC that is responsible for bringing prosecutions, not the state?

Jeremy Wright: My right hon. Friend raises an interesting point. As I have said, it is of course a matter for the BBC to decide how this concession should be structured. It is open to the BBC, as it has demonstrated, to choose a model that does not offer a free TV licence to every over-75 year old. The question of enforcement is an interesting one that we will go on considering. I would hope very much that the BBC will take seriously the comments of my right hon. Friend and others about how this obligation should be properly enforced in the future.

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Perhaps the most difficult part of growing old is the loss of a husband, wife or partner—the person you have shared your every day and every thought with, often over a lifetime. There are nearly 600,000 widowed men and 1.5 million widowed women over the age of 75. An estimated seven out of 10 widows and widowers will lose their free TV licence. That is nearly 1.5 million people who have lost their life partner who will now be stripped of the comfort of their television by this Conservative Government. Can the Secretary of State live with that?

Jeremy Wright: The decision that has been made is to transfer that responsibility to the BBC. How the BBC chooses to exercise its responsibility is, as it and we say, its responsibility. The point that the hon. Gentleman makes is a fair one, and it needs to be heard by the BBC as it decides what more it can do to help those who are in particular need or are particularly vulnerable. That is exactly the conversation that I am having with the BBC at the moment, and that we will continue. The decision for the hon. Gentleman is how he intends to back up the pledges that he has so far made to take that responsibility back to the taxpayer, and how he intends to fund that change.

Youth Services

5. **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to improve the quality of local youth services. [911744]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I am excited and proud to be working cross-Government, with this Department leading, on developing a new youth charter for our young people—the Government's vision for the next 10 years—and that work has continued this week. The Government invest in the Centre For Youth Impact to support sector-led evaluation and to build evidence of the impact of local youth services, and we are working with the National Youth Agency and partners to renew the youth worker qualifications and review that curriculum.

Tim Loughton: “Positive for Youth” was the Government's last comprehensive youth policy document. It contained many good examples of joint project working between local authorities and charities and philanthropic businesses, a pledge to youth-proof Government policy, and a pledge to publish annually a set of national measures to demonstrate progress in improving outcomes for young people. When does the Minister plan to update the House on that progress?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for his pertinent reminder to the Government and the House to focus on our youth. I believe that the youth charter will reaffirm the Government's commitment. It will state that our young people should have a strong voice, and that we must listen to it and take note of the issues that they care about. It will set out how we should act on what they tell us and, more importantly, it will state that we are actively involving them in key policy making. It is vital that we do that. I had the youth steering group in with me just this week. So the sector is very much being heard, and will be reported back and listened to.

Commercial FM Radio

6. **David Morris** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): What steps he plans to take to increase the provision of FM frequencies for commercial radio in (a) the UK and (b) Morecambe Bay. [911745]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The UK's independent broadcasting regulator, Ofcom, is responsible for radio spectrum planning, and Ofcom's view is that due to the general scarcity of FM spectrum, the scope for additional frequency resources to be made available to commercial radio is extremely limited. Ofcom's current priority for the use of remaining FM spectrum is community radio, and I hope that will be of benefit to Morecambe Bay.

David Morris: Will the Minister carry out an investigation of the audit suitability for FM spectrum in the north of Lancashire as soon as possible, to free up any spectrum service that should be licensed, to facilitate a new local service, as we need more local services in that region?

Margot James: I agree with my hon. Friend that we need more local services, but there is more than one route to that. I cannot undertake to commence a review of the north-west specifically, and it is for the independent regulator Ofcom to distribute remaining FM frequency, but I would like to reassure my hon. Friend that the development of small-scale DAB multiplexes will provide many opportunities for community radio stations, not least in the Lancaster and Morecambe area.

Tackling Loneliness

7. **Gillian Keegan** (Chichester) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help tackle loneliness. [911746]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): As we have heard this morning, the UK is a world leader in tackling loneliness, and the first Government loneliness strategy was launched last October. It has been globally recognised, and includes the £11.5 million building connections fund, announced over Christmas, which is a partnership between the Government, the National Lottery and the Co-op Foundation. The first progress report is due later this year. Last month, we launched the Let's Talk Loneliness campaign, which is all about reducing stigma. The hashtag alone has had 5.5 million impressions globally.

Gillian Keegan: I am proud of the work that the Government are doing on loneliness, but according to Age UK more than 2 million people in England over the age of 75 live alone. Loneliness is thought to be as harmful to our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. In Chichester, we have some fantastic projects such as the Rotary Club's Building A Generation, in which every two weeks older people go into Chichester College and meet, and share experiences with, college students. What more support is available to encourage such innovative, community-based solutions for tackling loneliness and to help to spread them more quickly across the country?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work done by all the great charities in her community to tackle loneliness at all ages. Support is available

for community-based projects, including two pots of Government funding. There is £1 million for the Tech To Connect challenge—I know my hon. Friend is interested in tech—to address social isolation, and the fund will be managed by Nesta. We also have the Space To Connect fund, which will be part-managed by the Co-op and will have £1.6 million to open up community spaces. Everything happening in Chichester is helping people come together, and I welcome that.

Mr Speaker: These Chichester people seem very decent folk indeed. I think it is partly the effect of the Member.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Earlier this year, the Minister was good enough to come to a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on suicide and self-harm prevention and speak to us about the loneliness strategy. What steps will she take in response to the Samaritans' paper on loneliness in young people, which is a particular concern?

Mims Davies: I particularly remember that meeting and I welcomed the opportunity to join her. We currently have 60 different policies across nine Departments, but I would like to point out that loneliness and isolation can affect people at any age and at any time—including young carers and care leavers. We need to support everybody of every age and every gender. I hope that the new policies that we are working on and will announce later this year will have a youth focus.

Commercial Local Radio

10. **John Grogan** (Keighley) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the regulation of commercial local radio. [911749]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The regulatory framework for commercial radio on FM and AM set nearly 30 years ago has not kept pace with market changes, and we have taken steps to address that. I welcome Ofcom's October 2018 changes to the localness guidance, which will reduce the burdens on commercial radio while maintaining requirements for local stations to provide local news and other content.

John Grogan: Given that media giant Global has cut no fewer than 11 local radio studios in England, despite making massive profits, is there not a danger that under those weaker Ofcom regulations commercial local radio will increasingly lose its localness, and broadcasts will be made from London or several regional centres?

Margot James: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern, but the localness guidelines are strict and tough, and will require large commercial radio corporations to have local studios. They will have to provide a serious amount of local news content, weather, driving information and so on, so I do not share his concern. It is up to Ofcom to police this, and it is doing a good job. We must remember that for local commercial radio, and indeed community radio, to be sustainable, they needed a lighter touch regulatory regime.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May I briefly beg your indulgence, Mr Speaker, to congratulate St Fagans Museum in my constituency on winning the museum of the year award, which was presented last night in a ceremony at the Science Museum?

The hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) said earlier that we needed more local radio, but the results of this deregulation have been job cuts and fewer stations in what is a profitable commercial sector. Is it not time for the decision to be reviewed to assess its impact on localness, and to ensure that local radio does not just become national commercial radio?

Margot James: The localness guidelines were published as recently as October last year, so I think it would be premature to announce a review of their impact, but I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that they were welcomed by both commercial and community radio stations. Ofcom has received about 700 expressions of interest in the small-scale DAB multiplexes for which we legislated last month. We hope to be able to complete that legislation by the end of the year so that Ofcom will be able to start issuing licences to hundreds of community radio stations up and down the country. I think that we will see a great growth in this fantastic sector.

2022 Commonwealth Games

12. **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that the 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham benefit (a) neighbouring boroughs and (b) Walsall. [911751]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): The Commonwealth Games in Birmingham will be the biggest sporting event ever held in the west midlands. Last week the Government announced that the region would benefit from nearly £800 million of investment. The venues for the games will extend from Royal Leamington Spa to Coventry and to Cannock Chase. There will be 11 days of sport across the west midlands, along with cultural and business engagement, trade and volunteering. The hon. Gentleman should keep his diary clear, because the event will be showcased at the Walsall shopping centre on 20 July.

Eddie Hughes: I understand that the training venues will be announced later this year. Will the Minister put in a good word for the British judo Centre of Excellence in Walsall?

Mims Davies: The available training venues are currently being reviewed. I understand that there has already been an initial meeting with representatives of the British judo Centre of Excellence and the University of Wolverhampton regarding the possible use of their facilities. Many great sporting facilities in the west midlands and, indeed, across the United Kingdom will want to host training events, and I am sure that they will receive a very warm welcome from my hon. Friend.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Five junctions up the M6 from Walsall is the great city of Stoke-on-Trent, which stands ready to play its part. How will the Minister ensure that the benefits to which she has referred are felt throughout our region and not just in the conurbation, and what strategy does her Department have for a long-lasting legacy programme so that those benefits do not disappear once the games have ended?

Mims Davies: The hon. Gentleman has made an important point about the joy that will be felt not only in the west midlands but in the whole of our country. We should bear in mind the economic impact of the games in Glasgow in 2014, which brought more than £740 million to Scotland's economy, and the £1.3 billion boost for the Gold Coast following the games in Queensland. We expect the Birmingham games to bring jobs and opportunities such as volunteering, with up to 45,000 people involved in delivering the event. This is a catalyst for a legacy in terms of facilities and on the ground, and I am working towards that result as we head towards "three years out".

Topical Questions

T1. [911754] **Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): Semi-finals are dangerous places for England's sports teams. I am sure that the whole House will wish to offer its commiserations to the Lionesses following Tuesday's result, but also our huge congratulations on their performance throughout the World cup competition. Although it did not produce the result that we wanted, Tuesday's match attracted the largest live television audience so far this year, and the team has sparked a significant change in the visibility of, and support for, women's football and women's sport generally. That in itself is a fantastic achievement. We also send our best wishes to the England men's cricket team for their semi-final next week in a world cup that has given people around the world another good reason to visit the United Kingdom this year.

Tourism is a significant but often overlooked part of our economy, and last week we launched the tourism sector deal, the first of its kind. The coming together of industry and Government will mean more investment in accommodation, skills and apprenticeships and data to ensure that we attract even more tourists and business visitors. We also intend to ensure that everyone can visit by making the UK the most accessible tourism destination in Europe by 2025. Tourism matters greatly in many of our constituencies, and the sector deal will give it the long-overdue Government recognition that it deserves.

Thangam Debbonaire: May I associate myself with the remarks of the Secretary of State about the Lionesses, and also of course wish good luck to the England cricket team?

The epidemic of appalling online bullying demonstrates that the online world is effectively not abiding by the same rules as the offline world, and people are suffering right now, so now that the consultation on the White Paper on online harms has closed, will the Secretary of State urge the new Prime Minister to prioritise legislative time so that we can sort this law out and protect people who are suffering right now?

Jeremy Wright: Yes. I believe that this is a priority, and I believe that the next Government should see it as such, and I believe that we should see legislation coming forward in the next parliamentary Session. The hon. Lady is right; the consultation on the White Paper concluded yesterday, but as she will have heard me say

before, I believe that this is a groundbreaking change that we need to get right, so the Government intend to continue to listen, notwithstanding the fair point she makes about the urgency of the situation.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to take this opportunity—I hope the House will join me as I do so—to congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) and the other three members of the string quartet known as Statutory Instruments on their magnificent performance in Speaker's House on Tuesday lunchtime; it was a virtuoso display of outstanding music—stirring, inspiring and admirable in every way. If you haven't heard them, you haven't lived.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): Particularly the cellist.

Mr Speaker: Yes, particularly the cellist, as the Government Whip on duty chunters from a sedentary position to very considerable public benefit.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Will the Minister update the House on the prospect of the Bayeux tapestry coming to this country on loan after the Bayeux museum is temporarily closed after 2020?

Jeremy Wright: We very much look forward to that prospect. Of course, as my hon. Friend will recognise, there are some technical challenges to be overcome to ensure that the tapestry can be properly displayed and protected, but this is an example of Anglo-French co-operation of which we expect to see a great deal more in the future.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): More than 6 million people watched England take on Scotland in the women's World cup and, as the Secretary of State just said, nearly 12 million people watched England take on the USA, and we send our condolences to the Lionesses. We have had some iconic and memorable moments. Hayley Lauder from my Livingston constituency got her 100th cap, and none of us will forget that magnificent celebration from Megan Rapinoe that made women and girls everywhere across the world say, "You can take up space; you can celebrate and you can be in sport."

However, a recent study found that 65% of broadcast sport in Scotland was taken up by men's football alone, and, as the Secretary of State knows, only 2% of print media is about women's sport. We must do more to capitalise on the incredible results from the women's World cup to make sure that women's sport, and particularly women's football, continues to be recognised in the way it has been.

Jeremy Wright: I agree with the hon. Lady; she has been a passionate advocate for this for as long as she has been in the House, and I am sure long before, and she is right. But I think we should recognise that some significant progress has been made over the last few weeks and months; even six months ago, if we had said in this House that we expected a women's football match to have the largest live TV audience of the year so far, standing as we are in July, I do not think any of

us would have believed it. So significant progress is being made. It was great to be able to see that match on the BBC on Tuesday and for there to be such a large audience for it. It is, as the hon. Lady says, inspiring girls and women to play more sport, and that is exactly what we want to see more of.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Does the Minister agree that one of the crucial aspects of tackling loneliness is raising awareness of the services, support and activities that are available in local communities, and what are the Government doing to achieve this?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I thank my hon. Friend for raising this point, because it is so important. Nobody walks around with an arrow on their head saying that they are lonely. There are times in our life when we feel lost or isolated and we need someone to turn to, so the 1,000 social prescribers will be very helpful. I know that my hon. Friend has done something directly in his own constituency with an older people's fair—an event around loneliness—to do just that, and I welcome all constituencies doing this.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): On behalf of all my colleagues on the Benches behind me, I would like to wish the very best of luck to the England cricket team. We also wish the best of British to all our British tennis players at Wimbledon, and we would like to thank the Lionesses for inspiring a generation.

Our children are facing a deadly obesity crisis. Obesity is rivalling smoking as a leading cause of cancer. Being healthy is about keeping fit and having a healthier diet, but the sugar tax has also been very welcome in promoting a healthier lifestyle, especially for children and young people. The Sports Minister has a responsible role to play in tackling obesity, so will she today publicly commit to resisting any call to scrap the sugar tax, even from her favoured candidate for Prime Minister?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue. She and I share a great passion for getting and keeping our young people active. I hope to announce the school sports action plan, alongside colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education, before the summer recess. We are very close to this. All money that comes into PE and sport from the premium—the levy has doubled this—is important. I hope to see Government investment in school sport continue in any way, shape or form.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): As this is 4 July, Independence Day, and despite this week's football result, will the Secretary of State, who like me has an American spouse, comment—positively, of course—on the very many benefits of our special relationship with the US?

Jeremy Wright: Neither my hon. Friend nor I would dare to do anything else, today or on any other day. He is right to suggest that this remains a very special relationship, not just in our households but across the nation.

T2. [911755] **Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): I welcome this week's announcement from the big five gambling companies that they will pay towards treatment

in acknowledgement of the harm that they have caused, but given the industry's track record, I am sceptical about their reliability. Will the Minister please look at a "polluter pays" mandatory levy?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Lady passionately believes, as do I, in ensuring that help gets to those who need it. Those who are affected by problem gambling, and whose lives are ruined thereby, need help as quickly as they can get it. The reason that I think it appropriate to welcome the moves that have been made by those five companies, as she has done, is that this will deliver help quickly and in the sort of amounts that a mandatory levy was always designed to deliver. Having said all that, if those voluntary commitments are not met, the Government will reserve the right to pursue a mandatory route instead. But let's get the help to those who need it as quickly as we can.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Manned by local volunteers, the local heritage centres in Desborough, Burton Latimer and Rothwell in the borough of Kettering do much to encourage an interest in local heritage in small communities that have seen much change as a result of new housing developments. What importance does the Department attach to encouraging the promotion of such venues?

Jeremy Wright: The answer is huge importance. My hon. Friend makes the important point that heritage is local as well as national. We can transform our communities in a number of ways, one of which is to give people clearer insights into the wonderful heritage around them. The heritage high streets fund will do that, as will many of the other measures that have been referred to.

T3. [911757] **Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab):** The Secretary of State will know that Coventry will be the city of culture in 2021. However, the Priory Visitor Centre in Coventry has closed through lack of funding. Will he talk to the relevant authorities to ensure that the Priory centre is adequately funded? Equally importantly, the House must remember that, at the time of the Wars of the Roses, the Parliament of Devils was held in Coventry.

Jeremy Wright: I will certainly look at what is happening at the Priory centre, but I know that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, as I do, that £8 million was found in the Budget to support Coventry city of culture, and we both look forward to it being a tremendous success.

T4. [911759] **Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab):** As we head towards the long summer holidays, sports centres are becoming increasingly important for families. Two years ago, Staffordshire County Council pulled the plug on my pool at the Kidsgrove Sports Centre. After lots of false starts and undelivered promises, we are still without a swimming pool. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can actually deliver a pool for my constituents?

Mims Davies: I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady. Sport England is active in communities to ensure that nobody is barred from getting involved in sport, and swimming is crucial as we come to the summer holidays.

T5. [911760] **Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD):** Ministers are aware of the nervousness about Brexit in the creative industries. What assurances can they give that the copyright protections in the European directive will be fully preserved?

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): We applauded the decision to pass the EU copyright directive, and I have met with bodies from the creative industries to discuss how best to implement it in the UK. That will take a certain amount of time, but we will be looking to protect the intellectual property and artistic creations of our designers and this country's brilliant creative industries.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked— **Victims and Witnesses in Court**

1. **Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab):** What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to support (a) victims and (b) witnesses giving evidence in court. [911724]

The Solicitor General (Lucy Frazer): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about how the justice system supports those who come before it, and witnesses and victims are an important part of that. One way in which the CPS supports victims and witnesses is through the pre-recording of cross-examination evidence, which takes considerable pressure off vulnerable witnesses. Following a successful pilot in three locations, the scheme was rolled out last month to a further six courts, including in Chester.

Justin Madders: The latest Home Office figures show that only 1.7% of reported rape cases even reach the charging stage, so what measures has the CPS put in place to support rape victims giving evidence? What is being done to support the other 98.3% of victims?

The Solicitor General: The CPS takes seriously its role in ensuring that prosecutions do come before the courts. As the hon. Gentleman will know, a cross-governmental review into rape and sexual offences is under way and has already completed its first stage of collecting evidence. We are now looking at the whole system for rape and other serious sexual offences to see how we can improve every stage, including getting more prosecutions and convictions.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I will not go into the details, but we have had a sensitive local case in which a victim of child sexual exploitation was not supported. A trial did not take place, through no fault of her own. What further action can the Solicitor General take to ensure that victims are supported at all stages of the process?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Last month, I visited the CPS areas of London North and London South and talked about those very issues. I also visited SurvivorsUK, a charity

that deals with male victims of sexual abuse, to talk about how we can support people before, during and after the process, which is a critical time.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is indeed shocking that 98.3% of reported rapes are not even charged. In a significant number of those cases, further evidence is sought from the police by the CPS, but it simply is not provided. Has the Solicitor General asked the police and her colleagues at the Home Office why that is happening?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the importance of collaboration between the CPS and the police. I know that they work closely together, because I regularly meet the Director of Public Prosecutions, who is working with the police on matters across the board, including several relating to disclosure. I recently met Assistant Commissioner Nick Ephgrave to ensure that we get people to come forward. The number of recorded serious sexual offences is going up, but we need to improve on that, and steps are being taken by the CPS.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: With the greatest respect to the Solicitor General, this is an urgent situation and that is not an answer to the specific question. The reality is that the Crown Prosecution Service is referring matters back to the police, and the police are not coming back to the Crown Prosecution Service with that further evidence.

The Solicitor General mentioned a review in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), but something has to be done about this now. Will she undertake a forensic analysis of why these statistics are so bad, and will she do something about it?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point that shows how the CPS and the police are working better together. The CPS is sending cases back to the police because it is reviewing those cases to ensure they are ready and will not fall when they go to court. Having spoken to the assistant commissioner, I know that 93,000 police officers have undertaken disclosure training to ensure they are better trained so that these cases are ready for trial and will secure successful prosecutions.

Unduly Lenient Sentence Scheme

2. **Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con):** If he will extend the list of offences included in the unduly lenient sentence scheme. [911725]

The Solicitor General (Lucy Frazer): I know my hon. Friend takes very seriously the importance of getting appropriate sentences for those who are convicted, and he worked closely with my predecessor on extending sentences for those who had received lenient sentences. The ULS scheme remains an important part of the justice system to ensure justice for victims' families.

I can tell my hon. Friend that, in 2018, the Law Officers referred a fifth of all eligible cases to the Court of Appeal and, of those, 73% were found to be unduly lenient. In answer to his question, we are looking carefully at the ambit of the scheme.

Philip Davies: It has been a long-standing promise of this Government to extend the unduly lenient sentence scheme to other offences. Apart from a bit of tinkering, they have basically done very little. May I urge the Solicitor General to get on with it and extend the unduly lenient sentence scheme so that we can have appropriate sentences? That would be good for victims and for restoring people's faith in the criminal justice system.

The Solicitor General: I assure my hon. Friend that I am looking at this with the Ministry of Justice, but the increase in the number of offences is more than just tinkering. For example, since its inception, the ULS scheme has been extended to some sexual offences, child cruelty, modern slavery and, in 2017-18, a number of terror-related offences. This is something we are looking at.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Can we have clarity on how the scheme works? I have written to Ministers complaining about too lenient sentences and about too severe sentences, and I never hear back. Can we have an explanatory memorandum on how the scheme works and what the follow-up should be?

The Solicitor General: I am happy to do so. A few hon. Members have referred cases to me, and I always write back, so I apologise if that has not happened. If any cases to do with my responsibilities come to him, I would like to know about that. We can discuss how the system works in more detail outside the Chamber but, in brief, a large number of people write to us about cases, which have to satisfy a number of thresholds. The cases have to be referred within 28 days, the sentences have to fall within the scheme and they have to be unduly lenient, not just lenient. There has to be a prospect of the Court of Appeal considering this to be outwith the range. I am happy to discuss these issues with him in more detail.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Many of my constituents were shocked when a fatal stabbing occurred on a quiet residential street in east Barnet. Will the Government consider whether it is time to introduce a tougher sentencing regime for knife crime?

The Solicitor General: The Government have taken a number of measures in relation to knife crime, not only on which weapons can be carried but on the consequences of such offences, including restrictions on the use of the internet and curfews. The Government take this issue seriously, and I am sure the Ministry of Justice, which is in charge of sentencing, is considering these issues.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Solicitor General believe this scheme is effective enough? We see that, of 943 applications under the scheme in 2017, only 143 were successful in seeing a change to a sentence. Is she prepared to review the scheme in the light of that?

Mr Speaker: I admire very much the hon. Gentleman's American tie. He is auditioning for a new role as a fashion specialist.

The Solicitor General: I point out to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that 73% of the cases that were referred by the Attorney General's office resulted in an increase in convictions. The reason for the disparity between the number of cases that are referred to my office and the number that go to the Court of Appeal is that a large number of them do not fall within the scheme in the first place, either because they are out of time or because the offences do not fall within the scheme. We must always remember that the judge has heard the trial, heard the evidence and read the pre-sentence report. Judges up and down the country are doing an outstanding job to ensure that, when crimes have been committed, perpetrators get the sentences that they deserve and victims get the justice that they deserve.

Drugs Gangs

3. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What recent progress the CPS has made in prosecuting drugs gangs in (a) Northamptonshire and (b) England. [911727]

7. **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the performance of the CPS in prosecuting drugs gangs operating in the UK. [911734]

8. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the performance of the CPS in prosecuting drugs gangs operating in the UK. [911735]

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): The Crown Prosecution Service is working closely with the police and other Government Departments to prosecute these increasingly complex crimes. In that great county of Northamptonshire, in which the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) is situated, the Crown Prosecution Service prosecuted no fewer than 337 defendants for drugs offences and secured 305 convictions in the year to 2018. The conviction rate for drugs offences in England is over 90%, and last year alone 39,000 convictions were secured by the Crown Prosecution Service for these offences.

Mr Hollobone: Northamptonshire police have done much good work in recent weeks in raiding local cannabis farms and breaking up county lines drug operations linking London with Kettering and other parts of Northamptonshire. Does the Attorney General agree that, when the police catch people doing these awful things, it would help if the Crown Prosecution Service pressed for exemplary sentences to be awarded?

The Attorney General: I strongly agree that it is necessary for us to bear down on drugs gangs, and on county lines drugs gangs. My hon. Friend will know that the Government's serious violence strategy makes that a priority. In just one week in May, in a targeted effort of co-ordinated law enforcement activity, there were 586 arrests in connection with county lines drugs gangs, and 519 adults and 364 children were entered into safeguarding measures. That is a particularly fine record. I also agree that sentencing must be commensurate with the gravity of the crimes. We will continue to monitor and follow the drugs sentencing guidelines that are connected with these crimes.

Nigel Huddleston: The Attorney General is well aware that drug trafficking is an issue not just for urban areas, but for rural areas, villages and towns. How is he assisting more rural agencies, the CPS and, for example, West Mercia police in tackling drug trafficking?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend asks a good question in relation to rural crime. We must not forget that drugs offending extends into rural areas—quite often from the larger cities—and particularly into coastal communities such as those that I have the honour of representing. It is important that we do not lose sight of the rural dimension of drugs offences. I can assure him that we will be vigilant about ensuring that in the strategies of the Government, the police and the Crown Prosecution Service, rural drugs offending is not omitted from our considerations.

Vicky Ford: In Chelmsford, we have found that the increased number of police on the ground, coupled with the firm use of stop and search, has led to a large number of arrests and then prosecutions. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that it is vital that all law enforcement agencies work together to tackle drugs gangs?

The Attorney General: I completely agree with what my hon. Friend has said, and it applies, if I may say so, not only to law enforcement agencies, but to other agencies as well. We cannot forget that, particularly in county lines offending, there is a wide range of other dimensions at play and safeguarding agencies are also very important.

Leaving the EU

4. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU without a deal on the priorities for his Office. [911730]

5. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the priorities for his Office. [911732]

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): The priorities of my office are set out in the published business plan for this year. In relation to the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, my priority continues to be to support the successful delivery of the Government's objectives by giving legal and constitutional advice within the Government. I am of course also engaged in the support of preparations for future international co-operation between the Law Officers' departments, and with prosecution and other criminal justice operations.

Stuart C. McDonald: I am pleased to hear that the Attorney General is committed to continuing to provide sound legal advice in the face of fantasy politics, which he has a good track record in. Will he confirm that it is the Government's position that after a no-deal Brexit, article 24 of the general agreement on tariffs and trade cannot be unilaterally invoked to ensure a standstill in current trading arrangements, and that the EU cannot and will not be compelled to trade on that basis?

The Attorney General: Yes.

David Linden: If, as appears to be the case, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), of whom the Attorney General is a supporter, does become the next Prime Minister, will the Attorney General support the right hon. Gentleman's refusal to rule out a Prorogation of Parliament for a no-deal Brexit? Does he agree that that would surely be an act of constitutional vandalism?

The Attorney General: That question will be reviewed at the time. The circumstances of any application for Prorogation are a matter not for me but for the Prime Minister and Her Majesty.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Will the Attorney General confirm that, with or without a deal, British citizens will still be able to assert their fundamental rights through the British courts after Britain has left the European Union?

The Attorney General: Of course, the United Kingdom, in all its jurisdictions, has one of the strongest records for the rule of law in the world. I have no doubt that that will continue.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Further to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), the Institute for Government has noted that if Parliament was prorogued to facilitate no deal, it would not be possible to pass any Bills or the remaining secondary legislation needed to prepare the UK statute book for such an outcome. Does the Attorney General therefore agree that leaving the EU without a deal and with no functioning Parliament would lead the country into a legislative black hole at a time when people throughout the country would be looking to the Government for emergency actions?

The Attorney General: The House has been given the opportunity of leaving the European Union with a deal on three separate occasions. I do not recall the SNP ever voting for one of them. The answer is quite simple: we can still pass a withdrawal agreement and leave the European Union in an orderly way, but it is now quite clear that the imperative to leave the European Union is overriding. We must leave, and in my view we must do so this year—on 31 October.

Sexual Abuse Conviction Rates

6. **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to improve conviction rates in sexual abuse trials. [911733]

The Solicitor General (Lucy Frazer): Sexual offences, especially rape and child sexual abuse, are devastating crimes, and across Government we are looking into how we can improve conviction rates and prosecutions in this area of law. As part of the March 2019 violence against women and girls strategy refresh, we have been collecting evidence to help to inform the making of policy going forward. That collection of evidence is now complete and we are now looking across Government at how we can improve the criminal justice system in this area.

Tim Loughton: Court business continues to be dominated by historical sex abuse cases, while conviction rates for recent crimes remain depressingly low. Does the Minister agree that the securing of convictions needs more up-front working, with victims, witnesses, social services, Victim Support, the police and other agencies, to make it easier for victims to come forward and to make the court system more user friendly? What discussions does she have with ministerial colleagues to that end?

The Solicitor General: It is absolutely right that we need to investigate those cases and work closely with stakeholders and inter-agency partners at an early stage, and that is exactly what the CPS and the police are doing. There is an inter-ministerial group on this matter, on which I serve, and we met last month to discuss these issues. A large number of stakeholders are involved in the study we are doing, including Women's Aid, Refuge, Citizens Advice, the Survivors Trust and the Victims' Commissioner, and they are all inputting in this important policy area. I am due to meet the Victims' Commissioner this afternoon to discuss these issues further.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Newcastle's sexual exploitation hub brings together the police, victim support and social services to provide a wrap-around service for victims of these horrendous crimes, particularly for vulnerable young women who often cannot access the support available for children, which is something that the Spicer review said needed to change. But there is no statutory funding for the hub; at a time when police and local authority funding is under such pressure, it risks losing its funding and ability to provide this remarkable support. Will the Minister look at providing statutory funding for hubs of this kind?

The Solicitor General: I am very pleased that the hon. Lady has raised the important work that is going on in her constituency and am very happy to discuss that with her. I was very pleased to see some joint working when I went to Wales: I saw how the courts and all the inter-agencies were working together—I attended an inter-agency group that was working collaboratively. Collaborative working is essential. I am very happy to meet and to discuss the issue with her.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) is wearing an admirably bookish tie—presumably a commentary on his learning and scholarship.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): It is ambition, Mr Speaker.

Fantasists wrongly and unsuccessfully twice accused me of serious sexual offences.

When my hon. and learned Friend attends her inter-departmental group, will she please make sure that each person reads the book "Behind the Blue Line" by Sergeant Gurpal Viridi? It is a deeply shocking account of how one of Britain's largest institutions brought the apparatus of the state to bear on a campaign to destroy the life of one of its own finest officers.

I would welcome the chance to meet my hon. and learned Friend, the Attorney General, or both, preferably with the Home Secretary there as well, to decide on an investigation into how the CPS and the police did such shocking things.

The Solicitor General: I am very happy to give a commitment to meet my hon. Friend. I cannot speak for others, but I am very happy to meet him and will look forward to reading a copy of the book that he mentions.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): In relation to conviction rates for sexual abuse trials, I would like to ask the Minister whether she can comment further and perhaps in more detail—perhaps in a meeting with me—on how she is pursuing prosecutions, or how she is

helping the court to pursue prosecutions, for women who are trafficked here for the purposes of sexual exploitation. They are often among the most vulnerable and often the hardest to reach as witnesses, but often the ones suffering the most egregious and appalling abuse.

The Solicitor General: I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady. I was with the CPS in Canterbury last week, discussing some of the crimes in the Kent area. I am very happy to discuss this very important matter with her.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts and Measure:

Non-Domestic Rating (Preparation for Digital Services) Act 2019

Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) (Amendment) Act 2019

Church Representation and Ministers Measure 2019.

Serco Justice System

10.42 am

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will make a statement on the role of Serco in our justice system following the decision of the Serious Fraud Office.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker.

We very much welcome the fact that, subject to court approval today, the Serious Fraud Office has reached a conclusion in its investigations of Serco. These historical contracts ended in 2014 and were awarded as long ago as 2004. The agreement allows the parties to draw a line under the matter. Following the successful conclusion of this process, we see no reason why Serco should not continue to be a strategic supplier to Government and to compete for Government contracts.

We conducted an investigation of the matters raised in the agreement announced yesterday, and we are content that matters were resolved in 2013-14, when Serco reached a financial settlement of £68.5 million with the Ministry of Justice and undertook an extensive self-cleaning exercise.

Although we deplore the wrongdoing identified in the deferred prosecution agreement announced yesterday, we have confirmed that, since 2013, Serco has thoroughly overhauled its management, governance and culture and that these changes continue to be effective today. Serco is, and will continue to be, a strategic supplier to Her Majesty's Government, working across the defence, justice, immigration, transport and health sectors.

Richard Burgon: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

In 2013, evidence came to light suggesting that Serco may have been fraudulently charging the Government on its offender tagging contract, including for monitoring people who are dead. Serco had to pay back tens of millions of pounds to the Government and lost the tagging contract. A subsequent Serious Fraud Office investigation has seen Serco fined £19 million for fraud and false accounting linked to those prisoner tagging contracts. Does the Minister agree that this is just the latest scandal to hit our justice system involving the private sector in recent months? The private probation contracts were terminated early, HMP Birmingham private prison was returned to the public sector and new research shows disproportionate violence in private prisons. We have also seen the collapse of Carillion, meaning that prison maintenance works were brought back in house. Each time we are told it is an isolated case, so will the Minister finally admit that in reality it is a systemic failure?

Serco has £3.5 billion of current contracts with the Ministry of Justice. Given the findings of the Serious Fraud Office, will the Minister commit to a special audit of all existing Serco justice contracts? Those contracts include running prisons. The Government are currently receiving bids for a new generation of private prisons, so can the Minister assure me that Serco will not be allowed to run these new private prisons?

[Richard Burgon]

Finally, there is a current Justice Minister, not here today, who once worked for Serco as its chief spin doctor. Will this Minister guarantee that that Justice Minister has had no involvement in overseeing any current Serco contracts and will have no role in handing over any future lucrative contracts to his former employer?

Paul Maynard: The hon. Gentleman behaves as though this is somehow a new piece of information that has come to light. In fact, this is a very old piece of news, dating back to 2013-14, that has a very long tail. The SFO has conducted a very complex investigation into the fraudulent aspects of this behaviour, but in 2013-14 there was a vigorous effort on the part of the Government to investigate what Serco was doing and how it was managing these contracts that led to significant cultural change.

I am afraid that all we have heard today is a predictable ideological tirade of hostility towards the role that the private sector plays within our justice system, and it simply does not stand up to scrutiny. The hon. Gentleman raises the spectre of Carillion once again. Carillion was a very different affair; it cannot be compared at all with what is going on with Serco.

The hon. Gentleman also makes a point about the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), who has no Serco contracts within his ministerial responsibility—that is a complete red herring. The Ministry has already begun an audit into the contract for prisoner escort and custody services that Serco currently holds. We took action back in 2013-14, and this has transformed not just how the Ministry of Justice conducts its private sector contracts, but Government as a whole. We are confident that the ongoing work will ensure that we continue to deliver high-quality services at the best value for the taxpayer.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Is the Minister aware of whether any of the people involved in the original wrongdoing are still associated with the company?

Paul Maynard: I am not aware of any potential individual prosecutions arising from this investigation. What I can say is that, since the point of this investigation commencing, Serco has had a complete overhaul of its senior executives: it has a new chief executive officer, a new chief financial officer, a new chairman and an entirely new board. Serco has had a thoroughgoing overhaul and now recognises what went wrong in the past.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I congratulate the shadow Minister on securing this urgent question. He is right that right across justice, home affairs and other Government Departments, ill-conceived and badly managed contracts—on tagging, prisons, secure units, probation, immigration removal centres and asylum accommodation—are leaving vital public services in disarray.

The Government finally saw sense on probation, but elsewhere all that seems to happen is that the same small group of companies keeps getting more and more contracts, based on a race to the bottom towards cut-price service

provision. Is it not time for a fundamental review of how these contracts are awarded so that the Government are not fishing repeatedly from the same small pool of companies? Even the auditors in this debacle have been fined for their role, so what steps will the Government be taking to improve oversight of this type of contract?

Paul Maynard: I always have a regard for the hon. Gentleman, who is a diligent and effective Member of this House, but I have to disagree with him on this occasion. The Opposition seem to have a blind spot regarding the role that the private sector can and should play in the delivery of services within the public sector.

In December 2018, as part of the programme of audits across Government as a whole, the chief executive of the civil service wrote to all Government Departments asking each to include a contract of audit activity in the implementation of the general outsourcing review, focusing on gold contracts—that is, those of high value and high criticality—provided by strategic players. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be aware, even if he looks north of the border, that in many of these very complex areas of public procurement, the pool of potential companies that can bid for them will, by necessity, be small. That means that we, as Government, have to do our bit to make sure that we audit and assess the delivery of these contracts on the part of these suppliers.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What contingencies have the Government put in place for the risk that Serco ceases to operate, partly as a result of the fine?

Paul Maynard: We have absolutely no indication at all that the fine has had any impact on Serco's ability to deliver its current contracts to the Government.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I think the Minister deserves a medal for coming here with such a positive outlook on what has been a major catastrophe. In the case of all these strategic suppliers, one of the really key issues is the Government's oversight and management of contracts where things go wrong but the companies are too big to fail. What is his Department learning, and going to do differently, in making sure that the skills are there in the civil service to oversee these contracts and pick up the problems much sooner?

Paul Maynard: I am sure that there are few individuals in the House better qualified than the hon. Lady to assess the role of these contracts across Government as a whole, given her work on the Public Accounts Committee. Since 2010, one crucial change has been the introduction of Crown representatives in each of these business areas. That makes sure that Government have someone sitting inside the room making sure that decisions will be taken appropriately.

In my Department, we are reviewing all these contracts carefully, working with Serco and other private providers who work in the public sector to make sure that the quality of what they provide meets their contractual obligations.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): In the light of these rulings by the court, will the Minister undertake to review the wider operational

activities of Serco in the public sector, particularly in relation to its management of asylum seeker housing projects in the city of Glasgow? Will he write to his colleagues in the Home Office about that, particularly because of the issue of gross intrusions of privacy by Serco housing officers, which is a major problem in Glasgow?

Paul Maynard: The hon. Gentleman raises an issue of which I personally have no knowledge within my own Department, but I am more than happy to offer to raise it with the relevant Government Department he mentioned, and I am sure that it will then get in touch with him to discuss it.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister has been uncharacteristically defensive and quite strident this morning. Some years ago, I had a hand in using the round robin technique to try to explore just how many of these general service companies were being used by all Departments, and what came out of that involved billions of pounds. That started a real scrutiny of what was happening. Is it not the truth that not just at Serco but at many of these general services companies—I am not ideologically opposed to the private sector providing good services—there was a lack of control and a lack of independent checking? The Serious Fraud Office regularly looks at this company: surely he is not complacent about that.

Paul Maynard: The hon. Gentleman accuses me of stridency. I think that is the first time that has happened to me in this Chamber—clearly, I must have had my Shredded Wheat for breakfast. I will have to revisit my breakfast diet, it is fair to say.

I am delighted to hear that the hon. Gentleman has no ideological objection to the private sector having a role; he might want to have a chat with his Front Benchers. We often hear the idea that somehow the private sector cannot play a role but the third sector certainly can. I find that very hard to understand given that they are often supplying exactly the same things. We have areas of social enterprise that sit across the two, for example.

I recognise the point that the hon. Gentleman is trying to make. He is a very diligent Member of Parliament, as Mr Speaker often observes. I look forward to future round robin parliamentary questions from him that will test the mettle of Government Departments yet further.

Mr Speaker: The expression “Be careful of what you wish for” springs to mind.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It seems that no matter what the specific wrongdoing or general incompetence of a private sector supplier, with a few warm words from the chief executive of the day, they have access to billions of pounds of contracts. Will the Minister put in place an analysis of the costs of private sector provision in terms of tendering, legal wrangling, profiteering and loss of skills versus the benefits of public sector provision? It seems as though it is simply public sector bad, private sector good.

Paul Maynard: It is never a case of “public sector bad, private sector good”. As I have just pointed out to Opposition Members, a broad range of potential providers—including many in the third sector, such as social enterprises—have a very important role to play in the justice system. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Lady listened to the answer I am trying to give her, rather than speaking from a sedentary position, she would get an answer to her question. I never appreciate sedentary chuntering; it reflects badly on the Member conducting it.

The private sector continues to have a role to play, but as a Department we are very careful in inspecting what individual suppliers are doing through the Crown representative system and the work that our commercial officials in the Department do, to ensure that issues like this do not occur again. The hon. Lady acts as though it was all warm words back in 2013-14. It most certainly was not. As I pointed out in my response to the first question, there has been an entire leadership change at Serco. I often hear from the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) that in his own party, it is a case of new times, new management. It is the same with Serco.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): In the Public Accounts Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) and I have seen all too often good work by the Government, but only after an event has taken place. The Minister mentioned the Crown representative system. Is it not time for that system to be overhauled, so that Government are better at preventing these problems in the first place, rather than learning the lessons after? What is his Department doing across Government to lead on that work?

Paul Maynard: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. The role of the Crown representative is relatively new, having been introduced under this Government. It continues to take shape. It looks different in different companies. When I was a rail Minister, I worked with a number of Crown representatives who performed very different roles in the companies that they were involved in. I understand the point, and I will mention it to the Cabinet Office, which has responsibility for this wider policy area.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his responses to questions. Can he outline what discussions he has had with the Ministry of Defence, to ensure that the MOD will get service provision at an appropriate price and only for services that are required, to prevent a repeat of this?

Paul Maynard: The hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly valid point. I personally have had no contact with the MOD. However, I know that the chief executive of the civil service has contacted all Government Departments to ask them to review the contracts with the most “criticality”—that is the word used; it is not a word I like because it does not really exist. He is ensuring that all Departments are taking careful note of this issue.

Social Security Claimant Deaths

10.57 am

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if she will make a statement to clarify what documents concerning the peer reviews and coroners' reports into social security claimant deaths since 2010 are held by her Department, and whether all of these were supplied to Professor Harrington and Dr Litchfield, the independent reviewers of the work capability assessment.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): The Department holds the original commission and final report for all peer reviews of 'disability benefit claimants' deaths up to 2015. All these documents are kept for six years from the date of the final report. In October 2015, we moved from conducting peer reviews to internal process reviews. That change means we now hold more information, including the original commission, all emails relating to the case, the final report and any recommendations resulting from the internal review process.

As the House may be aware, the Welfare Reform Act 2007 committed the Secretary of State to publish an independent report on the work capability assessment each year for the first five years of its operation. In 2013 and 2014, Dr Litchfield led the fourth and fifth independent reviews of the WCA. The Department fully co-operated with the reviews and shared all relevant information as requested. To assist the WCA independent reviews and in response to a freedom of information request, we carried out a robust search to supply all necessary information to the reviewers. The record of the documents requested by or shared with the independent reviewers no longer exists, in line with the Department's document retention policy.

We take the death of any disability benefits claimant very seriously indeed and always conduct an investigation into the circumstances where we are informed that the claimant committed suicide. As the review contains extremely personal information, it would not be appropriate to declare which individual cases were shared with the reviewers on this occasion.

Debbie Abrahams: Thank you so much, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

Let me refresh everybody's memories following the point of order I raised about this yesterday. I have received a response to my letter of 10 May to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in which I expressed my concerns regarding the investigation and the information provided to the independent reviewers. I also asked for information on claimant deaths after being found fit for work following a work capability assessment, as well as on deaths in relation to the personal independence payment, and I still have not received any information on that.

In the reply from the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, nearly two months later, he said that although a

"robust and thorough search was carried out of information held by the Department...the outcome is that the Department does not hold any information"

in relation to what peer review reports were supplied to the independent reviewers. He also said that this was due to

"the length of time since the reviews were carried out, factors such as document retention policies, organisational changes and staff turnover".

These documents relate to the circumstances of people's deaths as little as five years ago. The independent reviewers were investigating the work capability assessment process, including the impact of assessments. It is deeply troubling that the Department appears to have no record of what was supplied to the reviews, especially as both Professor Harrington and Dr Litchfield say that they did not receive such documents. In the same response, the Minister tried to suggest that the reviewers did not request these reports. It prompts the question whether the Department's record keeping systems are fit for purpose or whether these documents were deliberately withheld.

Can the Minister confirm that these documents were not sent to Dr Litchfield in 2013? Why does his Department not hold records on what information was supplied to Dr Litchfield and to his predecessor, Professor Harrington? The Minister said in his response that the retention policy is that the Department does not keep these records. I find that deeply concerning, considering other Departments' requirements under the law to keep these data.

What steps will the Minister take to ensure any departmental reorganisation or staff turnover does not lead to the loss of such important and sensitive information in the future? Will he commit to an investigation into what happened to these documents, and will he report back to the House on the outcomes of this investigation? The Information Commissioner's Office spoke to members of staff who were in the Department at the time of the Litchfield review. How many members of staff who were in the Department at that time still remain?

Has the Department approached Dr Litchfield and Professor Harrington about the information they received, and if not, why not? The letter I received yesterday from the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work stated that the Department shared

"all relevant information which was requested by Prof Harrington and Dr Litchfield".

However, if they were unaware of the existence of these documents, how could they request them? Given that their remit was to examine the work capability assessment and that many of these reviews and coroners' letters contained grave concerns about the assessment process, why did the Department not provide them?

Since 2015, the Department has undertaken 84 internal process reviews, and six more have been received. The Minister will be aware of the ruling in *John Pring v. the Information Commissioner and the Department for Work and Pensions*, which led to the redacted publication of peer reviews in 2016. Will he commit to publishing redacted reports of these internal process reviews?

We are talking about the circumstances of people's deaths, as I have said. A Government's first duty is to protect their people—all their people—but they are failing the sick and disabled, and this reveals the enormity of that failure.

Will Quince: The Department takes the death of any claimant extremely seriously and always conducts an investigation into the circumstances. The Department is

continually working to improve its safeguarding practices, working with partner agencies and local government. The Department is presently undertaking a review of the departmental safeguarding policy and guidance available to staff, which will report in the autumn of 2019. The scope of the review is considering what more we at the Department can do to support vulnerable claimants, with an emphasis both on ensuring safety and on working with partners to provide the necessary support when and where necessary. The review covers all areas of DWP delivery activities.

The last independent review was in 2014. As I said in my opening response, we do not hold emails going back over 12 months, under our document retention policy. My understanding, however, is that the documentation was not requested by the independent reviewers, but we hold such information on the peer review process for six years. I should stress that we would share outcomes and lessons learned. As the hon. Lady rightly pointed out, we have about 20 to 25 internal process reviews a year—they do not all relate to suicides—but I would stress that we are fully compliant with the law when it comes to data.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): From my work in the Department, I know that Ministers take this issue extremely seriously, and they will be concerned to hear about the cases that were reasonably and sensitively raised by the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). Will the Minister confirm that whenever a claimant dies, a thorough review is undertaken by the Department and that that is the right process to follow?

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and the way he put it. We take all cases of this nature incredibly seriously, and the Department has undertaken 84 internal process reviews since 2015. It carries out such reviews for a number of reasons, not only in cases that relate to suicide. I stress that these reviews do not mean that the Department was at fault, and in the majority of cases they contain very personal information that it would not be right to publish. Nevertheless, it is incredibly important to carry out such reviews because, where lessons can be learned, they should be. Indeed, in numerous cases, they have been learned.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is deeply shocking that the Department for Work and Pensions has not kept documents relating to deaths that could have been related to DWP activity. We know from a freedom of information request that such documents were not passed to Professor Harrington and Dr Litchfield who carried out the statutory review of the work capability assessment. Surely, it was the Department's responsibility to ensure that those reviewers had all the relevant information.

The Minister's letter to my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) states that the documents have not been kept for a range of reasons, including document retention policies, organisational changes and staff turnover. Such bureaucratic language is wholly out of keeping with the pain felt by families and friends who are affected by the death of a loved one.

There is a systemic problem at DWP when it comes to meeting the needs of disabled people, and the facts speak for themselves: more than 1 million sanctions

have been imposed on disabled people since 2010, and in 2018-19, 73% of PIP and ESA cases that went to tribunal were found in favour of the appellant. The Government are currently carrying out seven reviews into different aspects of the social security system where disabled people were wrongly denied the support to which they should have been entitled.

What action is the Department taking to ensure that any documents relating to deaths in serious and complex cases that were related to DWP activity are retained in future? Will the Government now accede to widespread calls for an independent inquiry into the way that assessments are carried out and demand that medical evidence about the impact of such assessments on the health and wellbeing of claimants is fully considered? Will the Government commit to an independent review into the deaths of ill or disabled people that may have been linked to DWP activity? The Department owes a duty of care not only to those who it assesses for support, but to those families and friends who have lost loved ones in the most tragic of circumstances. The DWP has failed disabled people again.

Will Quince: I am disappointed by the hon. Lady's line of questioning. As I have said twice already, we take incredibly seriously the death of any claimant, and we always conduct an investigation into the circumstances. The last independent review was in 2014, and under our data retention policy, emails going back more than 12 months were not retained. However, under the peer review, such emails are held for six years, and we would have shared outcomes and lessons learned. We would have shared further information with the independent reviewers, but my understanding is that it was not requested.

The hon. Lady raises broader disability issues. This year, we are spending more than £55 billion on benefits to support disabled people and those with health conditions, which is around 2.5% of our GDP, and more than 6% of Government spending. This year, spending on the main disability benefits—the personal independence payment, disability living allowance and attendance allowance—will be more than £6 billion higher than in 2010, and disability spending will be higher every year up to 2023 than it was in 2010.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I know that my hon. Friend takes these issues extremely seriously, but I am curious about two things. He said there were 84 internal reviews, but that not all were related to alleged suicides. How many were related to alleged suicides? He said that emails are destroyed after 12 months, and I am surprised by such a short period. Is that in line with the policies of other Departments?

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. We do not know the number of suicides compared to the overall number of cases investigated under the internal review process. As I said, we carry them out for a number of reasons. Under the previous system, we did not hold emails going back over 12 months under the independent review process. Under the peer review process, however, we hold that information for six years.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on securing the urgent question.

[Carol Monaghan]

The Government's austerity measures have led to a system that no longer considers people as vulnerable individuals in need of support, but views them with suspicion from the outset. It is sickening that, when faced with such serious allegations as people's deaths, the Government took so long to admit their failure to send their own independent reviewer documents that Ministers knew would have linked the fitness to work test with the deaths of disabled benefit claimants. Why was that not deemed a top priority by the Government?

The Government seem content with private sector providers prioritising profits over people. How frequently does the Department assess the treatment of claimants by private sector companies? Will the Department follow the Scottish Government's lead and introduce audio recordings of assessments as standard to ensure accuracy and transparency?

The public will struggle to have any trust in the Government to deliver these Government-commissioned assessments for employment and support allowance, PIP and universal credit. Will the Department undertake a review of all commissioned assessments to ensure they do not lead to similar circumstances?

Finally, we very strongly support the hon. Lady's call for an independent inquiry into all deaths linked to the Government's social security reforms. Will the Minister commit to starting that immediately?

Will Quince: We take the independent reviews, the peer reviews and the findings of coroners incredibly seriously. Where there are lessons to be learned, the Department absolutely looks at how we can improve our processes and procedures to improve the service we provide to claimants. On reviewing the third parties we work with, we are already trialling audio recording of assessments. We will consider the results and whether it is appropriate to roll that out further in due course. I assure the hon. Lady and other hon. Members across the House that we of course audit and take a very close look at all those who provide services to the Department.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): When I raised the death of one of my constituents shortly after he lost his personal independence payment, I asked for an independent inquiry, which the Secretary of State refused. Given our exchanges today, will the Minister take the message back to her that I would like her to reconsider her decision? As the Prime Minister laid down for Hillsborough and the poisoned blood inquiry, it is the duty of Departments to produce information, not for the chair of an inquiry to fish for information crucial to the proper consideration of events that lead to someone's death.

Will Quince: The right hon. Gentleman knows the huge respect I have for him and the respect the Secretary of State has for him. I understand that she has already taken into consideration what he put to her at oral questions. We take it very seriously indeed.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Before I ask my question, may I remind the House that no one in the United Kingdom commits suicide? People take their own lives. The word "commit" relates to a crime. Suicide is not a crime in this country and has not been for some time.

When seeking information on the removal of the six-month time limit for terminal illness claimants, I asked for information about people who died while waiting for a decision relating to PIP. Between 2013 and 2018, 17,000 people died while waiting for a decision on their PIP assessment. I asked for the same figures in relation to universal credit, but was told that they were not available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost. How can the Minister say that he covers all deaths and takes them seriously when it is not possible to provide hon. Members with information on the deaths of people, many of whom have been found to be terminally ill, who have not been able to access universal credit?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for what she said on suicide. Language is important, and she was right to pull me and others across the House up for using that language. She raises a hugely important point. We are working closely with stakeholders in that regard, to see what more we can do, and I would be happy to meet her to explain in further detail the written answer that was given to the parliamentary question that she submitted.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Five hundred and eighty of my constituents were displaced in the transition from disability living allowance to the personal independence payment—a loss of £2 million a year. What is the Department doing to track the outcomes faced by those who are not in receipt of Government support? I think particularly of a case of mine, where a young man was forced to rely on his mother's financial support in the last months of his life before he died of a terminal brain tumour, because the Government rejected his claim for support. What will the Government do to track such cases?

Will Quince: What we are doing is spending £6 billion more, and we will continue to work with stakeholders where possible, to ensure that we can improve our processes.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Department has, as has been said, given us a number of reasons why this information is not available, but to the public and to those affected, it will seem that there can be only two acceptable or reasonable reasons—that the information was deliberately withheld and covered up, or that it was incompetence. To get to the bottom of this and to reassure the public, will the Minister give those of us who are asking today for that inquiry, the assurance that the Department will do everything it possibly can to get to the bottom of this?

Will Quince: In cases of this nature, our inquiries and investigations nearly always go alongside a coroner's investigation. So it is important to say that there is already that independent investigation, and we do work very closely with coroners and supply information as required by them.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): When we consider the sensitive issue of death by suicide of particular claimants, I want to press the Minister specifically on the issue of assessments being carried out inappropriately. For example, if someone presents for an assessment with a mental health issue, quite often they find that they are being assessed by a physiotherapist. What actions are the Government taking to ensure that assessments are done properly, by those with relevant qualifications?

Will Quince: Under PIP, people with a mental health condition are five times more likely to be exempted than under the legacy benefit system. However, it is important to say that it was the Labour party that introduced the work capability assessment, in 2008, and that we have made significant improvements to the WCA since its introduction. We will continue to work with stakeholders and Members from across the House to improve the process where we can.

Business of the House

11.18 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride): The business for the week commencing 8 July will include:

MONDAY 8 JULY—Consideration of a business of the House motion, followed by all stages of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill.

TUESDAY 9 JULY—Second Reading of the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 10 JULY—Motion to approve the draft Environment (Legislative Functions from Directives) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve the draft Town and Country Planning (Fees for Applications, Deemed Applications, Requests and Site Visits) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, followed by a general debate on tackling climate change, protecting the environment and securing global development.

THURSDAY 11 JULY—A general debate on 20 years of devolution, followed by a debate on a motion relating to leasehold reform. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee, on the recommendation of the Liaison Committee.

FRIDAY 12 JULY—The House will not be sitting.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. He announced the Northern Ireland Bill for Monday. As I understand it, the Bill will be published only later today. Despite a motion allowing amendments, there will be a window of only about half an hour for hon. Members to table amendments. This is a really important Bill, and the Opposition were happy to work with the Government to ensure that they get certainty on the Bill. Will the Leader of the House have discussions with the usual channels to ensure that we get scrutiny of this important Bill? We have always approached Northern Ireland on a cross-party basis, so I ask him to please think again.

Last week, I raised the issue of a debate on the Cox report, and the Gemma White inquiry is coming up. Can the Leader of the House update us on when the House is likely to be able to consider that motion?

I know that the Leader of the House is interested in tweeting: perhaps he could tweet a clarification. Last week, I raised the issue of the Government's Value Added Tax (Reduced Rate) (Energy-Saving Materials) Order 2019, and he said that it was an EU requirement under its regulations. In his answer to a parliamentary question in 2018, when he was a Treasury Minister, he said that

“it is right that Member States have flexibility in applying VAT on different products”.

Will he look again at whether it is possible for VAT to be changed on those materials, especially given the Prime Minister's commitment to reduce emissions to zero by 2050? The Leader of the House said that it was not something that he would necessarily have brought forward, so I ask him again whether the Government have any plans to scrap VAT in this important area.

[Valerie Vaz]

Perhaps the Leader of the House could also tweet the answer to this question. Who said that

“in a disruptive no-deal exit there will be a hit to the exchequer of about £90bn.”?

It was his right hon. Friend and former Treasury colleague, the Chancellor. I do not remember seeing no deal on the ballot paper. We did not get the sectoral analysis until we asked for it in the Chamber. The Leader of the House may say “It’s the will of the people”, but the people did not have the full information when they made their decision. I do not know whether he is aware of the message from the other place about the amazing cross-party support for a motion to set up a Joint Committee to consider a no-deal Brexit, which passed by 245 votes to 99. We all praise Select Committees, and this would be an important Select Committee because it would be a Joint Committee of both Houses. The motion would require the Select Committee to report by 30 September. As I am sure the Leader of the House knows, the first Council meeting will take place on 17 October, which is why it is important for us to have a discussion to decide whether we will sit through the conference recess and whether conferences will go ahead or Members will be here. It is an important time for the EU, so perhaps he will consider having a statement next week on those issues.

The Leader of the House wrote a lovely article in “Red Box” saying that he sees

“a large part of my role as promoting parliament—to do what I can to ensure that people trust and understand its vital role”.

Does he agree with a former Leader of the House, now a Government Whip in the Lords, Lord Young, who has said that he views with alarm the promises made by Tory leadership candidates? The shadow Chancellor has costed those pledges, and the total for the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is £57 billion and for the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt) it is £43.4 billion—more than £100 billion in total. Paul Johnson from the Institute for Fiscal Studies said that both candidates were misleading people by implying that the Treasury’s Brexit war chest would fund their spending pledges and that if they intended to borrow more, they had not said how much. It is making Parliament look absurd that the candidates can make those pledges to win their election. The people one of them will govern will not even have a say. What can the Leader of the House do to stop candidates misleading people?

It took an urgent question for the House to talk about what happened with Serco. A screaming headline in *The Law Society Gazette* reads, “Serco subsidiary to pay £19.2m for lying to MoJ about tagging profits”. This is absolutely appalling. The Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), was very helpful earlier—he is a very helpful Minister—but I think that we need a statement in Government time.

I invite the Leader of the House to visit the all-party parliamentary group on legal aid next Monday, when we will celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Legal Aid and Advice Act 1949, along with young legal aid lawyers. I am surprised that there are any left, but it will be good to see them there. The Leader of the House will know,

I am sure, that since 2010 the number of cases assisted by legal aid has dropped from 900,000 to 15,000. This is about the rule of law and access to justice. If the Leader of the House could ensure that the Government will automatically fund legal aid for the families of victims of terrorist atrocities—a subject that I raised with him last week—that would be a nice way of celebrating the anniversary of the Act.

I know that you, Mr Speaker, went to see Richard Ratcliffe when he was on hunger strike. I saw “Speaker Bear” sitting on his chair. Both Richard and Nazanin have now ended their hunger strike. I said to Richard that I would raise Nazanin’s case from the Dispatch Box every week until she was freed. Will the Leader of the House please make representations, as the Foreign Secretary seems to have gone missing and is making promises that he cannot keep? I know that great things are in store for the Leader of the House, not least because he has a wonderful mentor in the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). Will he please stand in for the Foreign Secretary and raise the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe? She is innocent, and she must be freed.

Earlier this week, Mr Speaker, you mentioned the loss of two of the House’s leading black and minority ethnic officials, Kamal El-Hajji and, of course, our own Speaker’s Chaplain, the Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin. Kamal was the first person with a BME background to be appointed to the role of Serjeant at Arms, and the Rev. Rose is now the Church of England’s first black female bishop. We are sorry that she could not be the Bishop of London, and I know that she was trying to be a Canon of Westminster, but I think that was taken away from her. She has been a great comfort to everyone on the parliamentary estate. She has been here during debates, and she has talked to us one to one. She has been a reassuring presence, and we are grateful for both her presence and her prayers. We wish the two of them well in their future endeavours.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. I shall come to them in a moment, but let me start by saying that I have some bad news. Unfortunately, I have had to cancel the holiday that I suggested last Thursday. The hon. Lady did not, I think, take my offer seriously, as she never replied to it. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) was prepared to join us and provide the musical entertainment, but the appearance fee that he demanded was utterly disproportionate to his talent. Two pounds fifty and a couple of cans of Irn-Bru was a generous offer, and the hon. Gentleman should have accepted it. I mean, who does he think he is, Pete Wishart or something? Perhaps not.

Let me now deal with the hon. Lady’s questions. She rightly raised the business for Monday, and asked whether there would be time for sufficient scrutiny of the Northern Ireland Bill and the tabling of amendments to it. All I will say to her is that we are very aware of the importance of both those matters, and discussions are taking place in the usual channels.

The hon. Lady asked me about a potential debate on the Cox report. We did, of course, have a debate on that report recently, but she also raised the important matter of the Gemma White inquiry, which will be reporting soon. We are at one in respect of the desirability of a

debate on that matter, and I am already engaged in discussions with my end of the usual channels with a view to such a debate.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of energy-saving materials again, and asked whether VAT was or was not applicable. More specifically, she asked whether it was a requirement of the European Union that we apply it at a certain level. That is my understanding, but given that the hon. Lady has pressed me again, which may mean that she has some information on this matter that she is keeping to herself—perhaps I am wrong; I do not know—I will check with the Financial Secretary to the Treasury and Paymaster General, who I believe is the Minister responsible for that particular issue and tabled the statutory instrument.

The hon. Lady also raised the matter of the £90 billion that the Chancellor has referred to in respect of a potential no-deal exit from the European Union. Of course that is a figure that has been out there for quite some considerable time, not least in the analysis that the Government provided some months ago—an across-Whitehall report on the potential impact of no deal on the Exchequer.

The hon. Lady also raised the matter of the Joint Committee proposed by the House of Lords, and referred to the vote on that. We will of course consider that proposal very carefully when it comes to this House, but I would point out to the hon. Lady that there have been numerous opportunities in the past to debate at length the potential consequences of no deal. None the less, we will take the Joint Committee proposal seriously and have a very close look at that as a potential vehicle for further discussion of that matter.

The hon. Lady referred very generously to my lovely article, which was rather a kind way of introducing her remarks on that, and then she plunged into the costs of the various promises that the two candidates in the Conservative party leadership contest may have been putting forward. At one point she totalled them up to the dizzying heights of £100 billion, which pales into insignificance compared with the £1 trillion that her own party seems to be putting forward in additional borrowing, or indeed in additional tax to be raised from the hard-working men and women up and down our country.

The hon. Lady referred to Serco, but of course we have had an urgent question just this morning on the matter. She made some important points about legal aid. Justice questions are on Tuesday and, as I mentioned last week, the Justice Committee is looking at precisely the issue she has raised around the availability of legal aid to the suspected perpetrators of atrocities compared with its availability to those who have suffered as a consequence of their actions.

I applaud the hon. Lady for raising Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe again, as I know she intends to at the Dispatch Box every week as the shadow Leader of the House. I can once again assure her that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and others have been very engaged in ensuring that somebody who went to Iran simply for the purposes of a holiday and meeting family and friends is not incarcerated in the way she has been.

Finally, may I also welcome the hon. Lady's comments regarding Rose Hudson-Wilkin and her appointment as Bishop of Dover? She will be much missed by this House, but will be a great asset and of great benefit to Dover.

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): May I first sincerely congratulate my right hon. Friend on taking on the role of Leader of the House and say how lovely it is to be asking the questions rather than answering them?

My right hon. Friend will be aware that yesterday the fantastic diversity and inclusion awards were held, celebrating all the House of Commons and Digital Service staff here in the House of Commons for all the amazing work they have done to try and improve the rates of diversity and inclusion here. So will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating everybody—all the nominees and award winners?

Will my right hon. Friend particularly join me in congratulating all those who worked so hard across parties on a very long-term basis—and also yourself, Mr Speaker, who supported the work—on the independent complaints and grievance procedure, which was one of yesterday's award-winning entries? May I also thank all the staff of the House of Commons, Members' staff, trade unions and so many people across the House who have really helped to ensure that everybody in this place in the future will be treated with dignity and respect?

Mr Speaker: Before the Leader of the House replies, I should like to echo very much what the right hon. Lady has said. Yesterday's ceremony was a very happy, even joyous, occasion on which we were able to mark and commemorate great progress while being very aware of the continuing challenges and the great deal of additional work that remains to be done. She herself won an award, which she has been too modest specifically to reference, and I think that she regarded it as a tribute to her, but also to all those who worked in her support. This is one of those situations in which we prefer to regard the glass as half full rather than half empty, but there is a fine line. I think we are deservedly proud of the progress, but we know that we still have a lot of work to do.

Mel Stride: Mr Speaker, I entirely echo your comments, not least those about the typical modesty and generosity of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) in recognising everybody who contributed to the team effort and achieved so much around the complaints and grievance scheme's steering group, but that does not for one moment take away from the critical role that she played in ensuring that we made progress not just on that matter but—as I am increasingly becoming aware as I get deeper into my role—across the many matters that the Leader of the House rightly has an interest in. I also thank you, Mr Speaker, and the staff of the House, the trade union representatives and all those who have been involved in these important issues.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing another exciting instalment of business for next week. I join him and the shadow Leader of the House in paying tribute to Kamal El-Hajji and Rose Hudson-Wilkin and I hope will get an opportunity to pay fulsome tributes to both individuals in the next few weeks.

The Leader of the House would do well to abandon this place for the next couple of weeks, given what is going on with this leadership contest. I am even prepared

[*Pete Wishart*]

to come on his holiday bus. I would bring my banjo and my cans of Irn-Bru, and I might even be prepared to waive my fee. I would even endure his rotten jokes, because surely we should do more than endure the purgatory of the business that we are facing right up to the summer recess. So, to spice things up a bit, may we have a debate about the Tory issue of the day—the return of foxhunting—and may we have the Foreign Secretary to introduce it before this particular fox is shot? When we are through with that, maybe we could have some legislation to reintroduce the children up chimneys Act, and then maybe a Bill to reintroduce workhouses before we move on to the dunking of witches. Such are the great offerings from the Tory leadership contest to keep us up to date with the modern zeitgeist.

Then can we have a debate about the precious, precious, precious Union? The Tories are beginning to sound like a demented Gollum who is about to throw the ring that unites them all into Mount Doom, which is probably quite apt. The Prime Minister is in Scotland today with yet another devolution plan—and no, of course it is not another desperate attempt to salvage the “precious”. This is the problem, and the Tories just don’t get it. For them, it is all about doing things to Scotland; it is never about listening to what Scotland actually wants or understanding the type of nation that we want to be. Scotland will never accept their buffoons’ Brexit. For them, Scotland is probably already lost. The “precious” is already beginning to melt in the pyre.

Lastly, can we have a debate about Brexit? You know how we were given all this extra time to try to resolve it? Maybe we should debate it occasionally. We have heard both the candidates for the Tory leadership saying that they are prepared to take this country out of the EU without a deal, and we have to start to prepare the parliamentary fightback. There is a huge moment coming, and it will be the no-deal Brexiteers versus parliamentary democracy. Democracy says no to the Brexiteers, and we now have to get ready for that fight.

Mr Speaker: Before the Leader of the House responds, I would just say to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), so that the business is not left unfinished, that there most assuredly will be tribute sessions for the Speaker’s Chaplain, the Rev. Rose, and for the departing Serjeant at Arms, Mohammed El-Hajji. Those are likely to be separate sessions—my office is in discussion about that matter—but the hon. Gentleman can be assured that, consistent with the principle of showing respect for people who have made an outstanding contribution in the service of the House, those sessions will take place.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) for his usual cheery contribution to our proceedings, but he was playing the same old tunes, as he does week in, week out. However, I have discovered that he and I actually have something in common, because we share a love of the Rolling Stones. Indeed, I believe that the hon. Gentleman once recorded a cover of a Rolling Stones classic for charity. Given the Scottish people’s firm rejection of independence, the song could serve as the Scottish National party anthem, because it was “You Can’t Always Get What You Want”. The hon. Gentleman’s love of the Stones

may explain why, when it comes to the Government’s record, he always paints it black and why, even after becoming the current longest-serving Member of a Scottish seat—18 years—he still can’t get no satisfaction. [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh.”] I know that that was all unbearably cheesy, but that is the whole point of the jokes on these occasions.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that I should desert this place because there is not enough going on, but I point out that 44 Bills have completed their passage through the Commons during this Session. In fact, since the Prime Minister appointed me as Leader of the House, a new Bill has been introduced every three sitting days, so we are actually upping the tempo.

The hon. Gentleman called for further debates on Brexit. I think that many in this House would feel that we have probably had more than enough such debates, but I assure him that it is inconceivable that there will not be many more Brexit debates in the weeks and months to come.

Finally, Mr Speaker, I endorse, echo and say how pleased I am to have heard your remarks about time being made for Rev. Rose and the Serjeant at Arms so that we can thank them in the appropriate manner.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I join others in paying tribute to the Serjeant at Arms and the Speaker’s Chaplain. I also joined the protest at the Iranian embassy. I am also delighted to say that Southend-on-Sea was a regional winner in the Tiffin cup, which is another reason why Southend should become a city.

Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the legal position of parents who have children with learning difficulties after those children reach the age of 18? The matter needs to be looked at, because those who really do know best about the needs of their children can currently be overruled by the state when it comes to their future welfare.

Mel Stride: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the success of the restaurant in his constituency. I completely appreciate the position of parents who have been caring and making decisions for their children, and it must be incredibly difficult when they do not have the automatic right to continue to do so when a young person turns 18. That would make an excellent subject for a debate, or if my hon. Friend would like to write to me, I would be happy to facilitate a meeting with the appropriate Minister.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be delighted to know that, as a result of recent generous allocations of time for the Backbench Business Committee, we have now started to get a bumper bundle of applications from Back Benchers from across the House on a weekly basis. If and when time arrives, we already have a healthy list of debates pencilled in for future dates, including an important application for an urgent debate from the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) and the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell). We also have a long queue of unallocated debates following applications from Members from across the House, so with three weeks remaining before the summer recess, any time thrown our way will be greedily snapped up.

Finally, I chair the all-party parliamentary rail in the north group, and some of us regard the rail investment situation being more northern poorhouse than northern powerhouse. We recently had a presentation from Arriva Northern, which told us, gladly, that Pacer trains were to be phased out by the end of the year, but we found out only a few days later that that was fake news. Can we have a statement from the Department for Transport about rail investment in the north? It is time that the decades-old Pacer trains departed from all the stations in the north of England.

Mel Stride: I am pleased to hear that the hon. Gentleman has great demand for debates. I am always happy to point colleagues in his direction when they have good ideas for debates, and I congratulate him on his excellent work.

The hon. Gentleman specifically raises the issue of rail in the north, and we have invested a record £13 billion in transport in the north. Investment across the UK in transport, and rail in particular, is at the greatest level since Victorian times. Of course, looking at investment per capita, more is going to the north of our country than to the south.

This issue of Pacer trains has also been raised in the Chamber this week, and I am happy to see whether we can organise a meeting between the hon. Gentleman and a relevant Minister, or to decide an appropriate way forward on that specific matter.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Leader of the House will know that next week's planned Westminster Hall debate on libraries has been postponed due to the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), being on compassionate leave. I know that you, Mr Speaker, and the whole House send our heartfelt condolences and deepest sympathies. None the less, she, you and the Leader of the House will want the debate to be rescheduled, because we need to know what the Government will do about the nationwide closure of libraries, through which new horizons are seen, new ideas are seeded and second springs start.

John Clare said:

"E'en the small violet feels a future power
And waits each year renewing blooms to bring,
And surely man is no inferior flower
To die unworthy of a second spring?"

And for you, Mr Speaker:

Are we a breed that no longer loves to learn?
Is ours an age where once-cherished books burn?
Or will we come again to seek and yearn?
To decipher, to distil, to discern?

Mr Speaker: I think we feel enriched, elevated and energised as a result of the right hon. Gentleman's characteristically cerebral intervention.

Mel Stride: I begin by echoing the thoughtful comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) about the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca

Pow). Of course, the thoughts and prayers of the whole House are with her and her family at this very difficult time.

Mr Speaker, you suggested that our last exchange was of such cerebral quality that it should be framed and presented to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings, and I have the framed copy here. I will, of course, present it to him directly after business questions.

Mr Speaker: Splendid.

Mel Stride: It is, indeed, splendid. I think I am right in saying, knowing John Clare well—I did not confirm this with my right hon. Friend prior to his question—that he may have been quoting from "The Instinct of Hope," which includes the line

"And why should instinct nourish hopes in vain?"

Well, his hopes of me will never be in vain, for my instincts are always to deliver for one of those I admire most in this House.

On the very important debate that needs to be delayed, I am happy to meet him, and perhaps the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, to see what we can do to bring that important debate before the House as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: That is really very satisfying indeed. I am now looking for a brief contribution.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The injustice of the Windrush scandal continues. Many of the people in my caseload have still not had their cases sorted out. I do not know anyone who has been successful in claiming compensation, because the required level of evidence is so ridiculous.

I also know people who have been promised help that has not been delivered. To add insult to injury, one of my constituents, who was kept from returning home for years and who has finally been allowed home, has been told by the Department for Work and Pensions that he cannot claim universal credit because he has been away from the country.

Can we please have a debate in Government time, ideally on a votable motion, so that we can hold the Government to account and make sure that victims of the Windrush scandal can properly receive the compensation and benefits to which they are entitled?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises an extremely important issue, and there is no question but that the events around the Windrush situation were deeply, deeply unsatisfactory. For that, Ministers have apologised. We have set up a compensation scheme, as she will know, and there is a taskforce engaged in ensuring that it operates effectively. That said, if there are any specific cases that she wants to bring forward, I would be keen to see them and to liaise with Ministers accordingly.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): The Tiffin cup has already been mentioned. You will be aware, Mr Speaker, that it is an important part of the parliamentary calendar, and it took place on Tuesday this week. I am delighted to say that a new restaurant in my constituency, Soi Kitchens—it started up in only

[Mrs Pauline Latham]

February or March of this year—came second out of, I believe, 78 entries. Will my right hon. Friend congratulate the restaurant and ensure that as many Members of Parliament as possible are aware of the Tiffin cup? Will he encourage them to enter more restaurants next year, so that my constituents' business could perhaps win first prize?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to bring to the House the great success of Soi Kitchens. The House may be interested to know that the winner was Kuti's Brasserie, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith), but that does not for one moment take away the huge success that Soi Kitchens has achieved. I will be desperately trying to find an excuse to go to Milford to sample its cuisine.

Mr Speaker: Splendid!

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you had vacated the chair last week when I asked my business question, but I had a great deal of help from the Leader of the House in relation to a constituent who had gone missing in Zante. I would like to advise him that, sadly, my constituent still has not been found.

I want to move on to a more positive question; unfortunately, I always seem to ask difficult questions about Bridgend, particularly in relation to the news about Ford. Will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating the fact that Bridgend Further Education College has won the national award for further education college of the year? Bridgend College tops the league table in Wales for qualification completion, with a rate of 90% across all qualifications; it was awarded a double excellent in the education and training inspection carried out by Estyn; and the college's staff survey shows that 98% of staff are happy to work there. Can we celebrate what a wonderful place Bridgend is to live, work and invest in, for anyone who is seeking to take over the Ford factory, because we have a population committed to the best in education and training?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks about her missing constituent. It is deeply distressing that he has still not been located, but I am grateful that she brought the matter to my attention and we were able to meet immediately after the last business questions to see what could be done. Our thoughts and prayers are still with her constituent, and with his family and friends.

I am delighted to hear the news about Bridgend College. One of the most important drivers of social mobility in our society—I think we can all reflect on this, across the House—is education. It is one of the ladders by which we climb up in life, so it is wonderful to be able to celebrate the award that the hon. Lady's further education college has received. The fact that it is a further education institution is important, because there must be parity of esteem between further education and universities in our country.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is not often that an MP receives emails from constituents praising their local council for not doing something, but that is exactly what has happened in respect of Rugby Borough Council's urban meadows policy, whereby it is letting grass and

wildflowers grow on areas that were previously mown. That encourages insects and a diversity of flora and fauna, and it looks very attractive, particularly when the flowers grow through. One constituent has drawn my attention to the fact that it also provides a disincentive for unauthorised parking in areas where people used to park. Could we have a debate to consider the environmental benefits of this approach?

Mel Stride: I both join my hon. Friend in congratulating Rugby local authority on the measures it has taken in respect of the urban meadows policy and congratulate him on his hard work locally on those issues. The environment is always a good subject for debate, not least because of the Government's record in this policy area—the House will know that we are at the forefront internationally in having committed to net zero carbon by 2050.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Along with my colleagues, I welcome the announcement regarding UK Government funding for Birmingham 2022 and seek assurances that the Barnett formula will be applied with 100% comparability. Given the fact that Scotland has thus far lost out on £3.4 billion, due as a result of the confidence and supply agreement with the Democratic Unionist party, and with another DUP bung imminent, may we have a debate on the departmental application of the Barnett formula to ensure that Scotland is not shafted yet again by this Government?

Mel Stride: I will not use the same language as the hon. Gentleman, but having served in the Treasury until quite recently and been fairly intimately involved in two Budget cycles, the idea that Scotland has somehow been short-changed by our stewardship of the economy is grossly unfair. If he wishes to debate the Barnett formula, perhaps I should direct him towards an Adjournment debate, at which he can interrogate an individual Minister on that subject.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Last week, the northern powerhouse Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), aborted a visit to Great Grimsby. I had hoped that that visit would involve an announcement, after nine months of waiting, that would start the OnSide Youth project in my constituency. Will the Leader of the House please explain why this much-needed initiative requires a ministerial cavalcade and long-range cameras, when surely a written statement, preferably before 22 July, would suffice?

Mel Stride: If the hon. Lady would like to avail herself of my time after questions, I would be happy to discuss the specifics of that issue, which sounds slightly complicated in terms of visits, not visits, dates and so on.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): My constituent was refused a home visit to assess her employment and support allowance entitlement, despite her GP having advised that her health needs absolutely necessitated one. After three weeks of stress, threats of sanctions and calls, my constituent spoke of feeling suicidal, before her GP's recommendation was finally upheld. May we have a debate in Government time on the impact of sanctions on the wellbeing and mental health of social security claimants?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises a specific issue relating to one of her constituents and ESA entitlement. If she would like to write to me on the matter, I would be pleased to look into it and make sure that the relevant Minister looks at it accordingly and that it is properly looked into.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The Leader of the House mentioned £13 billion of transport funding for the north, but I am sure that figure would be met with great disbelief throughout the north. The latest dithering is over the reinstatement of the Colne-Skipton link to connect East Lancashire to West Yorkshire. That is shameful: it should be a priority for Government expenditure. In this zombie Parliament, perhaps the Leader of the House could ask the Government to hold a debate on how the expenditure of the two proposed candidates for the Conservative party leadership and office of Prime Minister will affect investment in the northern powerhouse. We could then discuss the lack of investment in the north.

Mel Stride: It is slightly surprising that the hon. Gentleman should continue to push on the issue of our commitment to the north in terms of expenditure, because the Mayor of Greater Manchester said:

“There is a tendency to be London-centric in the Labour Party and that tendency needs to be constantly challenged.”

That is why we, as a Government, have injected £13 billion—a record level—into better transport throughout the north, and why we as a party have planned central Government transport investment over the next three years that will be, as I said, higher in the north than in the south, on a per capita basis. We have also committed to more than £5 billion through devolution and growth deals.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): With the ongoing dispute at the Environment Agency over pay and with staff morale at Natural England being at an all-time low, will the Leader of the House organise an urgent debate on the relationship between the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and its key agencies, so that we can look at how it deals with its workforce issues?

Mel Stride: I think that that may lend itself particularly to an Adjournment debate. If the hon. Gentleman would like to drop me a line, I will make sure that I am supportive of any such request that he may decide to make.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Pharmaceuticals company Avara Avlon, which was sold by AstraZeneca two years ago, has gone into administration, leaving many long-standing employees, including my constituents, high and dry without the benefit of AstraZeneca's redundancy and terms and conditions. Can we have a debate to highlight the need to protect TUPE conditions in cases such as this and to highlight what the employees and my constituents feel is AstraZeneca's lack of duty of care?

Mel Stride: On this particular matter, involving a particular pharmaceutical company and the issues of TUPE, I would direct the hon. Lady to Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions on 16 July, when she will have an ideal opportunity to press Ministers on that matter.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Last week, Pakistan's Foreign Minister dismissed accusations of Christian persecution in Pakistan, claiming that any examples are only individual incidents that do not constitute a trend and comparing it with knife crime in the UK—what a comparison. It is very concerning that any member of the Pakistan Government should view 1,500 people of religious minorities being charged with blasphemy in Pakistan since 1987 as not constituting a trend. This is only the tip of the iceberg. I travelled to Pakistan last year and heard at first hand horrific accounts of abductions, child marriages, rape, forced conversions and other forms of persecution that Christians and other religious groups face in Pakistan. This week, I went to the Backbench Business Committee and requested a debate—67 Members of this House want to speak in that debate. Will the Leader of the House agree to set aside time to discuss the persecution of Christians across the world?

Mel Stride: I know that the hon. Gentleman, rightly, persistently raises—as he has done at more than one business questions since I have been the Leader of the House—the issue of religious persecution. He is absolutely right to do so. I know that his commitment to that particular issue has, as he has outlined, involved travelling to Pakistan and looking closely at some of the deeply disturbing matters that he has just raised. Given his persistence in raising these issues, perhaps he and I could meet at a time of his convenience and look at some of them and at the particular ways in which, using the parliamentary timetable, it may be possible to further the points that he is making.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I am proud to represent a borough that has some of the best schools in the country, so I am very disturbed that, in the past few days, Hackney New School has lost its fourth head in two years. The reason I raise this matter here is that it is a free school, which means that it is directly accountable to the Government. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate in Government time about how we ensure accountability of free schools in England and will he ensure that the Education Minister writes to me about that school?

Mel Stride: On the hon. Lady's last specific question, I have no doubt that her comments will have been heard and I will certainly follow up to ensure that an appropriate letter is written to her on that particular issue. Obviously, I do not know the specifics of the school in her constituency, albeit that it may be a free school—obviously, I cannot be expected to know as much about it as the hon. Lady—but I do not think that we should conclude that, because there are some problems with some free schools, as would be expected given the large volume that there are of them, that means that free schools per se are not a good or a successful idea. The reality is that, compared with 2010, there are now 1.9 million more children in good and outstanding schools as a result of this Government's educational reforms.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): May I say gently to the Leader of the House, who I know to be a fair man, that he should not underestimate the level of dissatisfaction with the Government's approach to the Northern Ireland business on Monday? It seems to be a pretty transparent and poor attempt to stifle debate on

[Conor McGinn]

issues such as abortion, equal marriage and restitution for victims of institutional abuse. Actually, it is an attempt not just to stifle debate, but to block any progress on them. I urge him to work through the usual channels and do the right thing: give us the proper time to scrutinise these important issues in this important Bill.

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raises an extremely important matter and he has my personal commitment to do just that.

Mr Speaker: I hope that that is reassuring. It is very explicit that, although there are ordinarily deadlines for the submission of amendments, it is possible for there to be manuscript amendments, and the decision as to whether manuscript amendments are permissible is a decision for the Chair. Therefore, the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), although legitimately concerned about this matter—and, I hope, reassured by the Leader of the House—should not languish in perturbation for the rest of the day because there is help at hand from the Leader of the House and potentially from other sources if necessary.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am finding it increasingly difficult to elicit any kind of response from HMRC to my letters on behalf of my constituents. The phone lines are often not staffed, attending HMRC parliamentary drop-ins brings no progress and chasing letters are simply ignored. But the plot thickens because alongside this, after two previous corrections from me, I have just received a third letter from HMRC to my home, informing me that I am an English taxpayer. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out the importance of HMRC responding to MPs' correspondence, and can he investigate how much potential revenue may be lost to Scotland as a result of HMRC classing Scottish taxpayers as English taxpayers?

Mel Stride: Clearly I am not privy to the specific case that the hon. Lady has raised. However, I urge her to beat a path to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, who has departmental responsibility for HMRC. If the hon. Lady requires my assistance in that purpose, it will be available. As to the observation that she might have been treated as an English taxpayer rather than a Scottish taxpayer, I would imagine that that might be slightly welcome, given that she might pay less tax as a consequence.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): As was mentioned at Prime Minister's questions yesterday, the company that owns Vauxhall Motors at Ellesmere Port has announced that we are going to get the new Astra model, but only if we avoid a no-deal Brexit. Now, I cannot help thinking that the reason the company has said this is that both the men who want to be the next Prime Minister have been talking up the prospects of a no-deal Brexit. Given that there is now a very specific threat to the livelihoods of many of my constituents because of a proposed Government policy, I am astounded that the Business Secretary has not been here to give a statement about how we are going to avoid those job losses. Please can we have a statement from the Business Secretary on this issue as soon as possible?

Mel Stride: I am not going to stray too far into the comments made by the two candidates to be the next leader of the Conservative party and Prime Minister, but my understanding is that both those individuals clearly recognise that it is better to have a deal, and that one of the reasons it is better to have a deal is to avoid the frictions at the border that would cause problems to car manufacturers and just-in-time elements of their production processes. As to how we might go forward, the hon. Gentleman is of course at liberty to propose this as a subject for debate, to request an urgent question on the matter or perhaps even to apply for an Adjournment debate, where he might have an opportunity to quiz the relevant Minister in some detail on the issues he has raised regarding Vauxhall Motors.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Families who adopt have specific support needs. Given that the all-party parliamentary group on adoption and permanence took evidence from over 1,600 people, including young people, about their specific needs, will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the future of the adoption support fund, which is due to end next year?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for all her work on this very important issue, not least as the chair of the APPG for adoption and permanence. I believe that she may have put in for a Backbench Business debate on the particular issue that she has raised. If she has a moment to meet me briefly over a cup of tea, I will be very happy to have a chat with her further about the matter and to see whether we can prevail upon the good offices of the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) to secure that debate for her.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Earlier this year, the Information Commissioner presented a substantial and important report to Parliament requesting an extension of freedom of information laws to outsourced public service providers, particularly drawing on the experiences of Grenfell and Carillion. I have discovered through a written question that the Government have responded in a letter that has been hidden away in the Library, but they are not proposing very much. Given the importance of this subject and the importance of the Information Commissioner's work, can we not at least have a statement from a Minister?

Mel Stride: I do not know the specifics of the letter that has been placed in the Library, nor what it says, but I am sure that the Ministers concerned will have heard the hon. Gentleman's comments.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, your enthusiasm for curry was very much on show at the Tiffin cup event on Tuesday night, when you made some quite inspirational remarks about the contribution that south-east Asian cuisine has made to this country. I invite the Leader of the House to recognise the excellent work done by all 69 nominees from across the UK who were put forward—in particular, that of Nakodar Grill in Dennistoun in my constituency, which won the Scottish regional heat and was then submitted to the final. That was fantastic. It is not just about the quality of food, which was ably judged by a team chaired by Ainsley Harriott, but the great contribution that these restaurants have made to local communities.

Tony and Johnnie Ginda, who come from one of the first Asian families in Dennistoun, established that restaurant. Many thought it would fail, but they fought against all the odds to make it a huge asset to the community. They do amazing community work as well as all the work they do to provide fine cuisine in Glasgow. I invite everyone to try it out if they are ever in Glasgow. I think we should have a debate in Government time on the fantastic contribution that south-east Asian restaurants have made to this country's heritage.

Mel Stride: I am not so sure about a debate, but perhaps we should resurrect the bus trip and go to visit all 69 of those locations, have a good meal and see just how good those places are—I know they are outstanding. I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating the Gindas on the hard work that they have done and their deserved success.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I had hoped to be asking the Leader of the House to join me in congratulating constituents on the opening of the community pub in Ryton, Ye Olde Cross, which has been bought by community shareholders, but, sadly, I have something much more serious to raise. Just over a year ago, I raised in this House the loss of over 100 jobs that would arise from the Government's decision to award the UK passport contract to a French-Belgian company. Last week, I was again at the delivery plant in Team Valley, being told about the loss of up to 171 additional jobs, this time on the money-printing side—a direct fallout from the loss of the passport contract. This is devastating for these highly skilled staff and for the local economy. Can we have a debate in Government time on steps to support these highly skilled print jobs for the future?

Mel Stride: First, Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions are on the 16th of this month, and that would be an excellent matter to raise with Ministers on that occasion. As to the loss of jobs around the printing of passports, the procurement arrangements and so on, if there are specific questions that the hon. Lady would like me to ask of Ministers, I will be very happy to facilitate that if she writes to me.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I am sure that all Members, and indeed the Leader of the House himself, are keen to try to reduce plastic usage or to recycle plastic where we can. It is therefore extremely important to have labelling on what plastics can and cannot be recycled. However, research from Which? has shown that 42% of the supermarket packaging that it analysed was either labelled incorrectly or was not labelled at all. Could we have a debate on plastic labelling so that we can ensure that what can be recycled is recycled, reduce the overall use of plastic and help towards the climate change crisis that we are now facing?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question because he raises an extremely important point. I think that right across the House we are all deeply concerned about plastic. This Government have taken a variety of important actions, not least reducing the use of single-use plastic bags by some 86% because of the charges that we brought in in that area, but there is always more to do. He is right to raise the issue of the

labelling of plastics to make sure that it is appropriate. I wonder whether an Adjournment debate might be the best forum for bringing that matter forward.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Yesterday evening, I received the tragic news that a man had been fatally stabbed in Battersea. This is truly devastating, and what makes it more painful is that it seems to be happening too frequently. My constituents should be able to live freely and safely, but increasingly they feel as though they cannot. Could I ask Leader of the House two things? First, can we get a statement from the Home Secretary on the serious violence strategy because, as it stands, we are facing a national crisis and we do not appear to be hearing anything from him on this? Secondly, can we have a debate in Government time that will look into the root causes of the rise in violent crime, and the urgent resource that desperately needs to be put into our schools, our youth service provision and our police services?

Mel Stride: First, I take this opportunity to thank the hon. Lady for our recent meeting on nystagmus. I look forward to coming back to her on the points that I undertook to look into, in the hope of giving this issue a higher profile, which indeed it deserves.

On the tragic event in her constituency—the death of, I assume, one of her constituents—our thoughts and prayers are with the friends and family of that individual. She commented that these situations are occurring too frequently, and I cannot but agree with her—they are indeed. It is the Government's view that there are complex issues underlying why these stabbings occur, such as young people getting involved in drugs, in gangs and in county lines. It needs a multi-agency approach that goes right across Government in order to unpick it, as the hon. Lady suggests. It also needs some finance. In the last Budget, £100 million was made available to make sure that we have the resources in order to undertake the work required. She specifically called on the Home Secretary to come to the House to make a statement. The Home Secretary has made various statements over time on precisely these matters, but I know that he will have heard her comments on this subject.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am very privileged to have in my constituency the largest population of showpeople in Scotland. Can we have a debate on the forthcoming census, which would allow us to remind them that, for the first time ever, they can tick a "showpeople" box and be recognised in their own right?

My other question would be to ask you, Mr Speaker, whether we might be able to host some colleagues from the Showmen's Guild in New Palace Yard who have kindly offered to bring some teacups and other fairground rides to put there. I wonder whether that is something that could perhaps be organised in the weeks to come.

Mel Stride: It is rather nice that the hon. Gentleman should have mentioned showpeople, who contribute in an important way to our culture and our society. I would be very happy, if he would write to me, to give some serious thought to how we make sure that the points that he has raised are better ventilated.

Points of Order

12.18 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Oh, a veritable flurry of points of order! I call the person who leapt to her feet with exemplary alacrity, speed and athleticism—Thangam Debbonaire.

Thangam Debbonaire: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance on the need for Ministers of the Crown to speak accurately about the actions of Members of this place and the other place in legislative processes and to seek to correct the record as soon as possible when they inadvertently give information that turns out not to be correct.

The Prime Minister has been given several opportunities by me and others to correct the record and clarify that, contrary to what she said in reply to my question and one other last week in Prime Minister's questions, which must have been misinformation that she had been given, the Labour Lords did not block or attempt to block the statutory instrument for the UK to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Despite emailing the Prime Minister, tabling a written question and asking her again yesterday following her G20 statement, the Prime Minister has chosen not to correct the record, but merely to repeat some of her previous statement.

Mr Speaker, what guidance do you have for the next Prime Minister on the subject of either giving accurate information about the actions of colleagues or, when misinformed and therefore inadvertently saying something that turns out not to be correct, correcting the record as soon as possible? The public deserve to know that all of us here do our very best to uphold the traditions of truth and accountability.

Mr Speaker: The short answer is: be accurate, and if you are not, acknowledge the fact and make amends. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her intention to raise that matter and for informing the Prime Minister. In responding to the hon. Lady's point of order on 27 June, the Deputy Speaker encouraged her to pursue the matter by means of a written question. I note that the answer to her first question was disappointing to her, but that is, I regret to say, not an unusual experience for Members tabling questions to Ministers.

The best advice that I can give the hon. Lady in such circumstances is: persist, persist, persist—note my use of the word three times, its repetition twice. Quantity, persistence and, above all, repetition are at least as important as the quality of an hon. Member's argument. The quality of the argument, of course, must pass muster, but it is a great mistake to think that if a point is made once and has the advantage of being true, it will be readily acknowledged as such by all colleagues or outside observers. Sadly, in my 22 years in the House, my experience has been that that is not unfailingly the case. It is therefore necessary to keep going—if necessary, on and on and on until satisfaction is achieved. The Table Office would be happy to advise the hon. Lady on

further options available to her, and this process can potentially continue indefinitely until she has secured an outcome that suits.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I will come to the right hon. Gentleman, but it would be a pity to squander him at too early a stage in our proceedings. The House will want to savour the experience of hearing him in his characteristically poetic form and mood, so we will come to him erelong. Meanwhile, we will hear a point of order from Marsha De Cordova.

Marsha De Cordova: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Following the High Court ruling in 2017, the Department for Work and Pensions is now reviewing more than 1.6 million personal independence payment cases, to identify people entitled to additional social security support. Today the Department has released an update on its review, and the figures are deeply concerning. The Government had estimated that 14% of cases would see an increase in their award—an estimate that was cited multiple times in this place and outside it. But the figures released today show that just 0.8% of the cases reviewed have led to an increase in award. That is a significant disparity, and given the Department's shambolic record, we need confidence that it is not yet another error. I seek your guidance, as I believe this is such an important issue that an oral statement should have been made to the House.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her intention to raise a point of order on that matter. I am bound to say that I have not received notice of an intention by Ministers to make an oral statement—

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Oh! That is very helpful. The relevant Minister is in his place and veritably champing at the bit. Let us hear from the fella.

Justin Tomlinson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I notified the hon. Lady on 24 June about the latest stats publication, with an invitation to meet officials, which, I am pleased to say, has been accepted. We will continue to keep the House updated through regular statistical releases, as is the usual practice.

Mr Speaker: I cannot be expected to act as arbiter on this matter. What the Minister has told the House is of interest and relevance, and doubtless the meeting, which I assume is scheduled, will go ahead, and it may well provide enlightenment or satisfaction. If not, and the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) wishes to return to the matter, she can do so in the first instance, having alerted those on the Treasury Bench to her continuing interest, through the judicious use of the Order Paper, upon which she will be advised by the Table Office. It is perfectly possible that these matters will be aired again in the Chamber erelong.

Sir John Hayes *rose—*

Mr Speaker: We have now arrived at this exciting moment—I call Sir John Hayes.

Sir John Hayes: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I waited in vain during business questions to hear any mention of the plight of those who suffer from spinal muscular atrophy, such as my constituent, 12-year-old Rae White. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence approved a treatment for this condition in May, yet it now has become clear that the roll-out has been delayed and the allocation may be partial. Quite simply, those who suffer deserve better.

Mr Speaker: I had no advance notification of that point of order, but the right hon. Gentleman has brought to the attention of the House an extremely serious and pressing matter. I do not know whether he is suggesting that there is any mismatch between a public statement of what would happen and what is now happening. If so, that is a matter of real parliamentary concern.

I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I say that there is some analogy or parallel between what he has just raised and the matter that has been raised on a couple of occasions in recent months by the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), in relation to a different but very acute and serious condition and the availability or non-availability of the appropriate drug treatment. If the right hon. Gentleman wishes to raise that matter further in the Chamber before the summer recess, I think I can say with complete confidence that he will have the chance to do so.

I thank colleagues for what they have said and the Minister on the Front Bench for helpfully springing to his feet to assist us.

Local Roads: Funding and Maintenance

TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

12.26 pm

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Select Committee statement. The hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), who chairs the Transport Committee, will speak on her subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, the Chair will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call the hon. Lady to respond to those in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions and should be brief. Those on the Front Bench may take part in questioning. I call the Chair of the committee, Lilian Greenwood.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to make a statement to the House on the 10th report of the Transport Committee, “Local roads funding and maintenance: filling the gap”, which we published on Monday. The successful preparation of all our reports depends on the hard work of the Committee’s Clerks and staff, the diligence of the Members who make up our Committee—I am glad to see my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) in the Chamber—and the generosity of our witnesses, who give up their time to prepare for and take part in our sessions.

I particularly thank Paula Claytonsmith, Lynne Stinson, Lynne Wait and Anne Shaw for ensuring that we heard expert female voices in a male-dominated sector. I am sorry that the Roads Minister, the hon. Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), cannot be here today, but he has conveyed his sincere apologies, and I am sure he will pay close attention to *Hansard* tomorrow.

There is a plague of potholes blighting our local roads and pavements. This is not a new phenomenon, but one that successive Governments and councils across the land have failed to tackle. The consequences of this failure are all around us—we see them every day. I want to talk about the impacts of poor road and pavement conditions, why Government and local authority actions to date have been ineffectual and our report’s recommendations for tackling the problem.

On my journey to work, here in Westminster and out and about in my constituency, I see many examples of cracked and crumbling roads. Just today, a constituent emailed me about Green Lane in Clifton. Last week, Westminster City Council filled a pothole just around the corner from the Department for Transport that I had ridden into on my way home—I confess that it caused me to use some very unparliamentary language.

Our witnesses told us about the serious impacts that potholes have on the lives of pedestrians, cyclists, motorists and other road users. For example, poor pavements can strand older, frail and vulnerable people in their homes. Living Streets has found that nearly a third of adults over 65 felt reluctant to leave the house on foot due to the volume of cracks and uneven surfaces on surrounding streets, and almost two thirds of older people were

[Lilian Greenwood]

worried about the state of street surfaces. Nearly half said that well-maintained pavements would make them more likely to go for a walk. Poorly maintained roads create real risks for vulnerable road users. DFT data shows that the number of cyclists killed or seriously injured due to defective road surfaces more than tripled between 2005 and 2017.

Local authorities must compensate motorists for damage to vehicles resulting from poor road conditions, and the cost of doing so has risen dramatically in recent years. Kwik Fit has estimated that the damage caused to vehicles from potholes in 2017 cost £915 million to repair, an increase of more than a third on the repair bill in 2016. Based on its share of Britain's car insurance market, the AA has estimated that 3,500 claims had been made for pothole damage in 2017. The cost of this compensation ultimately falls on taxpayers, and it diverts money away from funding vital public services.

One of the most frustrating things about poor road conditions—this came through very clearly in our evidence—is the lack of any consistent reporting tool that drivers, cyclists, pedestrians and other road users can use to report problem potholes. Some councils have their own online tools, and there are nationwide sites such as FixMyStreet, but there is a lack of transparency around the whole reporting process, little clarity about what will be done and no guarantee that people will get a reply. Mark Morrell—“Mr Pothole”—for years a doughty campaigner against the pothole scourge, made a powerful case to us to fix this.

Why, year after year, do these problems persist? Why have successive Governments and local councils not done anything about them? In truth, they have tried, but their efforts have been inconsistent, and as a result the outcomes have been sub-optimal. They are constrained by three key things: funding, information and collaboration.

The key issue is funding. For decades, councils have complained that they do not have the funding to undertake a preventive—and, ultimately, cheaper and more effective—approach to maintaining their local roads and pavements. Successive Governments have responded to this by providing short-term, stop-start capital pots, such as the pothole action fund. Any extra funding is of course welcome, but the wrong funding in the wrong place at the wrong time means that councils simply mitigate the most obvious damage. It does not encourage the more effective, proactive maintenance that is the key to the long-term renewal of our local roads, as we heard from council after council.

The second issue is that councils sometimes do not have a full picture of the state of their road networks. If they do not know what they are dealing with, how can they plan and price maintenance properly? This lack of knowledge can be improved by innovating in data collection methods. There has been good work in this area in recent years, and there is a real desire on the part of Government and industry to work together to find solutions.

We heard about a similar willingness to innovate in the third area—good practice and collaboration. There is a real opportunity for initiatives such as the use of recycled plastic, self-repairing technology, graphene and even drones to bring down the cost of road repairs. We heard about the innovation and good practice going on across the country, but it was not always easy for this to be shared beyond individual councils and regions.

Our report makes a series of detailed recommendations to the Government to tackle these problems, and I want to highlight four of them. First and foremost, funding: there is not enough of it, and what there is is not allocated efficiently or effectively. Local government revenue funding has fallen by about 25% since 2010. The allocation within it for local roads is not ring-fenced, and it is often used by councils to plug gaps in other budgets. Capital funding, through the pothole action fund and other pots, is sporadic and time-limited.

To tackle this problem we recommend a front-loaded, long-term funding settlement for local councils in England. The DFT should champion it, and the Treasury should seriously consider it as part of the forthcoming spending review. This would enable local authorities to address the historical road maintenance backlog and plan confidently for the future. The settlement should not only include capital pots managed by the DFT, but roll up into a five-year settlement the revenue support elements of roads funding administered by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. This critical funding reform must not be an excuse for a budget cut.

Secondly, innovation is essential if the efficiency and effectiveness of local road maintenance is to continue to improve, which it must in the face of limited funding. It is right that the Government stimulate and encourage innovation, but the value for money of any investment is properly repaid only when new technologies, ideas and ways of working are scaled up and made available to all. In the light of this, we have recommended that the DFT work across government to collate all innovation funding for local roads in one place, establish as far as possible common rules for bidding and properly assess the benefits of innovation initiatives.

Thirdly, local authorities will be able to make better use of available funds for road maintenance only if they can target such funding well, and this requires good data. The DFT needs to be clear about whether the data it receives from local authorities on road conditions is consistent and allows valid comparisons to be made. It needs to be clear what it does with such data, how it is analysed and what action is taken on the back of the conclusions it draws. The DFT should also make it easier for the public to report road condition concerns and access local authority road condition data. We recommend that it does this by running an innovation competition to develop a platform the public can use to make online reports about road conditions directly to their council and to access real-time local road condition data.

Fourthly, making the best use of the available funding requires the sharing and adoption of good practice in road maintenance. This is a key role for central Government. The DFT should commit to monitoring and reviewing the current approach and reporting within two years on its effects and impacts. Local councils and industry are developing good practice in highway survey and maintenance. However, from the evidence we have received, it is not always clear that this is being widely shared. Regional highway alliances should be sharing good practice and benchmarking it against one another. The DFT could do more to facilitate this—for example, by providing a virtual good practice toolkit and repository, so that councils across England can find examples of good practice.

In conclusion, local roads are the arteries of prosperous and vibrant villages, towns and cities. They are critical to the movement of goods, as well as helping people to

get around. The consequences of a deteriorating local road network are significant. It undermines local economic performance and results in direct costs to taxpayers. The safety of other road users is seriously compromised. This plague of potholes is a major headache for everyone. It is time for the Government to be bold, to take up our recommendations and to give councils the funding and the wider system of support that they need if they are to deliver for our constituents the roads and pavements they deserve.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her statement and her Committee on its excellent report. She says, very importantly, that best practice should be shared. Her report makes it clear that there are 153 local highways authorities managing the English local road network. Does she agree that it would be a good idea for the Department for Transport to get the best five in the same room in the department with the worst five, knock heads together and drive through some improvement?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. It is certainly our intention that the Department identify where there is very good practice and share that widely, so that other local councils can take up that good practice. We hope that it will also hold to account, as will their constituents, the councils that are not currently doing a good job in keeping their roads and pavements in a decent state.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I echo the thanks to the Committee staff and to witnesses, and I also thank my hon. Friend for her skilful chairing of the Committee. Does she agree with me that the evidence we frequently heard was that the funding streams are complicated, coming from two different Departments—the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government as well as the DFT—and that the confusion caused by the bidding culture means resources are not necessarily allocated to the best places, particularly when so much of local government has been hollowed out?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and, indeed, for his contribution to our Committee, which is enormously valued. He is absolutely right to draw attention to the fact that it is not just the quantum of funding that matters; it is the way in which it is delivered. It is about having long-term certainty about the funding that is available, not wasting resources on bidding for pots of money that come at the wrong time. The bidding is in itself a cost to councils, some of which are better than others at doing it. That is why we have asked for a long-term settlement, and we have asked for a single stream of funding, rather than it coming in dribs and drabs, which simply is not the most effective way to spend taxpayers' money.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for her statement and her chairmanship of our Committee. I wish to raise a similar point to that made by the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner). Does the hon. Lady agree that much of the evidence we heard and that we hear from our constituents relates to frustration at repeated ineffective short-term repairs? One of the main things that this report seeks to do is set in place a funding system so that councils know how much funding

they will have in the medium and long term, and can therefore plan strategically and carry out sustainable repairs to our roads.

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is a valued member of the Committee. We have heard repeated evidence that councils are rushing around trying to fill the most dangerous potholes because they do not have the certainty of future funding. If they did have that certainty, they could plan ahead for maintenance and re-covering of roads, which is a much more efficient and effective way of doing things than the patch-and-mend approach in which a pothole gets filled, but if that is not done effectively, it returns, particularly when the weather is poor.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the comprehensive way that she laid out the scale of the pothole epidemic currently facing local authorities. What she said is underlined by a survey from the Asphalt Industry Alliance, which noted that the number of potholes filled by local authorities fell from just over 16,000 per local authority in 2012-13, to just over 15,000 last year. Does that not indicate that the scale of the problem is getting worse, not better? I commend the Committee for saying that what is needed is not the odd £420 million here or there, as we heard from the Chancellor in the Budget, but sustainable long-term, multi-year funding at the scale required.

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend and I commend him, as a former shadow Roads Minister, for his interest and knowledge in this area. We heard from industry about a lack of data on the quality of roads, and one of our recommendations is that the Government improve those data. There is a bit of a mixed picture. There has been a slight improvement on some A-roads that are managed by local authorities, but as my hon. Friend recognises, for many unclassified roads, the picture has got worse. Funding is key, but as I said, it is not just about the quantity of funding; it is the way it is delivered. We call on the Government to consult with local authorities in deciding future arrangements.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the Committee Chair on an excellent report. A week last Saturday, I attended a memorial service at Neston High School to mark 25 years since the death of Andrew Fielding who died on the A540 near the school. Ever since then his mother, Pauline Fielding, has campaigned for road safety improvements on that stretch of road, and although it is recognised that the road needs such improvements, we always seem to struggle with funding. If we could get that road, which is a major artery for the area, to be part of the strategic road network, that would open up lots more opportunities for funding. Will the review recommended by the Committee include consideration of whether certain roads should be part of the strategic road network?

Lilian Greenwood: The condition of our roads is an important part of road safety, and vulnerable pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists are put at risk when roads are not properly maintained. Our report focused on the local road network rather than the strategic road network, which is managed by Highways England. I cannot comment on whether the road mentioned by my hon. Friend is

[Lilian Greenwood]

rightly allocated, but a large amount of funding has been put into the strategic road network, and we must place the same focus on our local road network, which is, as the Minister said, part of our national infrastructure and hugely important. Our local road network is a national asset, and we must take care of it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for the report, which included input from my hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan), and the Government have set aside additional money to address potholes in Northern Ireland. Potholes are a daily nuisance in all our constituencies, not just because of their inconvenience, but because they pose a danger to cyclists, motorcyclists and those who drive cars. The Government refer to a 5 million pothole strategy by 2020-21. Does the Committee consider that strategy to be fully funded and a priority, because it is important to have a proactive response rather than a reactive one?

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and we want to move from a reactive to a proactive approach to mending our roads, so that local authorities can plan ahead. The pothole action fund has undoubtedly allowed local authorities to fill some roads and undertake work, but that often gets agreed within the year and is time-limited, so it must be implemented by the end of the financial year. That is not the most efficient and effective way to deal with the funding and maintenance of our local roads, and that issue lies at the heart of the Committee's report.

BILL PRESENTED

NORTHERN IRELAND (EXECUTIVE FORMATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No.57)

Secretary Karen Bradley, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Secretary David Gauke, Secretary David Mundell, Secretary Alun Cairns, John Penrose and Kevin Foster, presented a Bill to extend the period for forming and Executive under section 1(1) of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 and to impose a duty on the Secretary of State to report on progress towards the formation of an Executive in Northern Ireland.

Bill read the first time; to be read a Second time on Monday 8 July, and to be printed (Bill 417), with explanatory notes (Bill 417-EN).

Backbench Business

Sale of New Petrol and Diesel Cars and Vans

12.46 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to bring forward the date by which the sale of new petrol and diesel cars and vans will be ended.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee for producing the inquiry that inspired it. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) for presenting a report from the Transport Committee. That demonstrates the role that Select Committees are currently having in the life of our politics, and the importance of this Chamber in the absence of a lot of Government business.

Every transition in technology, or indeed social progress, generates resistance. Some people like to focus on the negatives and challenges, and use those as a reason for resisting or delaying change. I want to use this debate as an opportunity to talk about what needs to be and can be done, and shine a light on the many positives that will come from the move to electric vehicles.

Discussion of EVs usually starts with a focus on infrastructure or climate change, but as we are discussing what is ultimately a consumer product in a nation of car lovers, I will start by talking about the driving experience itself. I will start with what, in this day and age, is a confession: I love cars and I love driving. I am a proud member of the Association of Advanced Drivers and Riders, and I love watching Formula 1. Some time ago, however, a conflict began between my head and heart. My heart loved being a car owner and the freedoms that came with that, but my head knew the damage it was doing, and that by living in the centre of a city with a fantastic and award-winning bus service, I could afford to live without driving if I tried.

A decade ago I sold my car, and since then I have been an extremely happy user of the Brighton & Hove bus company, and an often irate user of Southern trains. Crucially, however, I have never regretted the move, particularly as new scientific data emerges on the impact that vehicle emissions are having on the quality of our air and on global warming.

As part of the BEIS Committee inquiry, not only did we undertake the normal avenues of parliamentary investigation, we also got out and about. We travelled to Norway to understand its outlier status as the world's most successful country in the transition to carbon-free transport. We went to the Milton Keynes's Electric Vehicle Experience Centre, where anyone can go to try out electric cars for themselves. As somebody who loves driving, I must admit that I was not really looking forward to it. I expected a sluggish, dull experience that pointed to a future in which people who enjoy driving will have to sacrifice their enjoyment for the sake of our environment.

I could not have been more wrong. All questions about range anxiety and charging times go straight out the window once you get going. The first thing you notice is how different the car's interior is. Losing the

need for a driveshaft and traditional gearbox means that designers and engineers have far more freedom to rethink the space used to enhance driver comfort and the passenger experience in an electric vehicle. Then you cannot help but notice how fast they are. There is no need to wait for the process of combustion in an EV, so initial acceleration, even in an entry-level model, is startling. I got a test of this when the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), who is in his place on the Government Benches, and I were going down the dual carriageway. I was on the inside lane and he shot past me on the outside lane. He certainly got around the first roundabout in Milton Keynes before me. You then become aware of the noise or, more accurately, the lack thereof. Few of us can afford cars whose engine noise is a thing of beauty, so doing without it altogether is a godsend.

Finally, because of the use of the reclamation engine to reclaim energy when decelerating, all but the most severe braking is done by lifting the accelerator pedal. It makes for an incredibly smooth ride, much smoother than that of the current automatic cars, although I cannot attest to the smoothness of the hon. Gentleman's journey that day.

In short, we should not guilt drivers into electric cars. We should start by pointing out how brilliant they are. That is also borne out by the evidence.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): When my hon. Friend was on his mystery tour, for want of a better expression, did he visit the Jaguar Land Rover plant and look at the electric cars there, or did he go to look at the black cabs made just outside Coventry, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Rugby, and try a ride in one?

Peter Kyle: I am extremely grateful for my hon. Friend's characteristically generous and insightful contribution. The Committee visited JLR—I was not on the visit—and the London Electric Vehicle Company plant. Indeed, the hon. Member for Rugby was a participant in that visit, for obvious reasons. I will talk a little later about that experience and the contribution that that company is making to the streets of London, our capital city.

The proof that driving an electric vehicle is an exhilarating experience and one that consumers enjoy is also borne out by evidence. In Norway, where 30% of new cars sold are electric, 96% of first-time buyers say that they would never consider going back to conventional cars. Evidence also shows that prior to buying an EV, potential customers have concerns about range anxiety. New electric car customers, however, report feeling liberated from petrol stations. Evidence shows that people who buy EVs love them and promote them to friends. People like me who have experience driving them soon aspire to own one.

Just as electric vehicles provide a great consumer experience, we should also see the opportunity they provide for British business, which has not only challenges but huge opportunities in this regard. British industry has already proven itself a world-leading EV maker with the Nissan Leaf, Europe's best-selling electric car, which is made right here in Britain, in Sunderland.

Our fantastic start is not being sustained, however, and there is no time to waste if we are serious about using the conversion to electric as an opportunity for

British industry. Low domestic demand, Brexit and unambitious policy have meant that Britain has lost out on the world-class manufacturing opportunities we should be snapping up. Honda is closing its car assembly plant in Swindon to make its electric cars in Japan. BMW, Vauxhall and Toyota are shipping their high-value parts, including batteries, from abroad rather than making them here. Once these global patterns are established, it will become really hard for British industry to break in.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): On that point, Cogent Power's Orb plant in my constituency makes very high-quality electrical steel and it is very keen to be a part of this industry in the future. What it needs from the Government is support for smaller companies to help to grow the supply chain. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government could help industry in this way?

Peter Kyle: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point, which is fundamental to not only saving the industry but exploiting it. It is about not just car manufacturers but the supply chain. It is part of a comprehensive industrial strategy that our country cannot afford to miss out on. We will only succeed in the way she mentions, and succeed in achieving the kind of ambition she has for her local industry and her local businesses, if the Government are an active participant in making that happen. That is the lesson we have learned repeatedly in recent decades and repeatedly in the past year alone.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Jaguar Land Rover is investing a lot of money in making electric batteries at its research and development centre in my constituency, but not enough has been done to create the infrastructure for electric cars that is badly needed. Does my hon. Friend not agree that more could be done in that area?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): May I just say that we have a very packed debate afterwards and that the opening speeches are meant to be approximately 15 minutes in length? I hope that helps.

Peter Kyle: I am very grateful, Mr Deputy Speaker. You will be pleased to hear that I have got my speech down to 12 minutes. Interventions allowing, I will crack on.

My hon. Friend makes another very good point. It is great that we are making batteries in this country and I thank the Government for launching the Faraday challenge, which is important in inspiring and nurturing the sector, but we need to do a lot more. There is absolutely no doubt about that. The ambition of operators needs to be matched by the ambition of the Government for the electrical vehicle infrastructure itself. Otherwise, it will not succeed.

Right now, trends are emerging globally. We therefore have a window of opportunity that we cannot afford to lose. We must not miss out on this opportunity to establish Britain as a world leader in design, manufacture, assembly, and distribution for electric vehicles and their component parts. Industry cannot do that alone. As the interventions I have taken prove, the industry needs the Government to be an active and generous partner at these nascent stages of one of the world's most significant emerging consumer trends.

[Peter Kyle]

Increasingly, electrified transport will become a normalised part of British life. People will experience it for themselves regularly from now on. As they do so, suspicion of its practicality will fall away. For example, in just 18 months' time there will be 9,000 fully electric black cabs on the streets of London. As part of our inquiry, we visited the London EV Company and saw for ourselves the cutting-edge skills and technology being deployed by this great Coventry-based firm. Its product sets new standards, raising the bar on passenger comfort. Cab drivers love it, too. Next month, Brighton and Hove takes delivery of its first fully electric bus, and London already has several on the roads. When I was walking through Westminster a little while ago, I heard an extraordinary squeaking noise. I turned around and there was a double-decker bus. The only thing I could hear was the squeaking of the tyres as the bus made its way down the road. These are extraordinary innovations, which will transform not only our ability to tackle climate change, and the passenger and driver experience, but our lives in cities, because of the lack of the noise pollution that goes along with the combustion engine.

Our Government have a target of "almost every car and van" being zero emission by 2050, and for new cars and vans to be "effectively" zero emission by 2040. Our Committee found several faults with those targets. First, the phraseology used by the Government leaves plenty of room for interpretation. It is too vague to have bite. Secondly, the target dates themselves are miles behind other nations. China, India and Norway will all phase out petrol and diesel vehicles over the next decade, so why cannot we? Perversely, we are not even managing to beat countries within our own United Kingdom—Scotland has a target of 2032. Moreover, the motor manufacturers themselves are not hanging around for our targets. Honda will be producing electric-only vehicles within seven years, Porsche by 2030.

All those factors lead me to believe that when it comes to electric vehicles, the ambition of consumers, operators and manufacturers is outstripping that of our Government. If the UK is serious about being an EV world leader, as our Government claim to be, we must bring forward a clear, unambiguous target to achieve zero emissions from cars and vans by 2032. To achieve that target, Government will need far more ambition not just in its rhetoric, but in its action on the ground.

We need a revolutionary approach to charging infrastructure—not the incremental one that we have right now.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Would my hon. Friend accept that, as well as more charging points, we need a proper economic structure to maintain them? From my experience, that is not working on the ground. Does he agree?

Peter Kyle: I cannot disagree with my hon. Friend, particularly in an era when councils like Brighton and Hove City Council have experienced cuts of over 45% to their budget. We are investing massively in new infrastructure, but maintaining it will be a crucial challenge. We need to share the costs with the people who make money from the charging infrastructure, such as the electric companies, and the people who use the service.

We also need to ensure that, for the sake of our climate change objectives, these things are subsidised as well. The cash must be there in the system.

The Government have absented themselves from the opportunity to become the driving force in making access to publicly available charging stations ubiquitous, and have instead devolved responsibilities to cash-strapped local authorities. As a result, a quarter of local authorities have not installed a single EV charging point in the last year. That is simply not good enough.

In the coming months, Brighton and Hove City Council will install 200 charging points across the city. Next week, I shall be joining one of the teams to see for myself what it takes to create a modern charging network. I am pleased to say that a representative of Brighton and Hove City Council who is leading on the programme is here with us in the Chamber today—I welcome Pete Turner to our debate.

Some 60% of EV charging takes place at home, which is why so many people feel liberated from being dependent on fuel stations; but for those of us who, like me, live in flats or high-density housing, on-street charging is essential. My street is scheduled to have two charging points installed in the coming months. Several London boroughs are converting street lights into charging stations.

So we know that the technology and expertise exists, and we really need to get on with it. My fear is that cities like Brighton and Hove will become exemplars in public charging facilities but others will not. That is great for people who want to drive to our city, but unless surrounding towns, cities and destinations are suitably equipped, it will not be great for people who live in Brighton and Hove who want to get out and about in their cars. Charging a car should not be a postcode lottery. EV owners should not have to do research before setting out on a trip. Infrastructure should be ubiquitous and should be evenly distributed throughout our country, and only active Government participation can make that happen.

Until EVs reach the scale of production that we have seen for conventional vehicles, their cost will remain higher. Until then, the Government also need to level the playing field with incentives. Tax breaks and other incentives work—there is no escaping that fact. Last October, when the Government suddenly cut the plug-in scheme, growth in sales of plug-in hybrids plummeted from 29.5%, which we had achieved in the previous 10 months, to just 1.7%. That was highlighted just an hour ago on the BBC website, where it was reported that the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders had said that

"sales of plug-in hybrid cars had halved"

in the last year,

"while hybrid electric vehicle sales were down 4.7%."

Transport accounts for 26% of our CO₂ emissions, adding another layer of urgency to the need for electrification of our road transport.

As all of us who sat on the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee inquiry learned, the transition to electric vehicles is about a lot more than just cars on the road. Its impact will be far and wide. It will change patterns in daily life for most citizens. Implications for policy makers range from the infrastructure of our nation, such as electricity generation, to the distributional challenges for our national grid—and the

ability to capitalise on new resources with millions of batteries to be drawn down on at peak times, just as we need to charge them at others. People's homes will adapt, so that people can fuel their car from home.

Also, of course, the transition is inextricably linked to our ability to tackle climate change and the climate emergency, to meet levels of CO₂ emissions reduction that our country and planet need from all of us. That is why this debate is so welcomed and so important. It is also why it is the start, not the end, of what I hope is ongoing parliamentary involvement from this point forward.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): May I suggest to everybody an eight-minute limit, in order to give equal time?

1.5 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), who during our inquiry became the most vociferous advocate for electric vehicles, drawing attention to the difference in the driving experience. I shall focus my remarks on the impact on my constituency and some of the business opportunities that arise as we run down the sale of vehicles powered by internal combustion engines.

I was an enthusiastic participant in the inquiry and I support the target that the Committee decided on—to bring forward to 2030 an end to the sale of new cars and vans powered by internal combustion engines. That will put the UK in the first tier of EV transition and will help harmonise objectives across the UK. That puts real pressure on some of our manufacturers, but it also provides some very serious opportunities.

I want to talk about commercial vehicles. As the hon. Gentleman said, this is not just about private vehicles but about commercial vehicles too. I shall refer to the London Electric Vehicle Company, which manufactures taxis in my constituency. I also want to make some remarks on charging infrastructure and some of the problems that we are experiencing in my constituency.

I admit at the outset that I am not a driver of an electric vehicle. I have recently been in the market for a new car, but I prefer it if somebody else takes the initial depreciation, so I run a car that is maybe one or two years old. There is not yet an effective market in second-hand electric cars, and there is some concern about the life of batteries. I know that an internal combustion engine car that has 20,000 miles on the clock at two years old is approximately a fifth of the way through its life. We do not yet know that about electric vehicles, and that market will develop. I am also put off by the capital value. On a like-for-like basis, the electric vehicle is currently approximately £10,000 more than the equivalent with an internal combustion engine, although I do very much recognise the lower running costs. I shall refer to those in respect of taxis.

I am also a little concerned about range anxiety. I use a car for travelling short distances around my constituency, but on occasions want to drive 100 miles or so to Westminster or 200 miles to visit friends, and I am concerned about being able to charge the car. I shall return to the subject of infrastructure later.

I am delighted by the opportunities for the west midlands economy and welcome the news in respect of Jaguar Land Rover, which is about to build on the I-PACE vehicle, currently on the market, by developing an all-electric XJ—its big saloon. That will be available in 2020 with 300 miles between charges, and provide a UK-manufactured opportunity to compete with Tesla. I know that the XJ is the car of choice for our Ministers and I very much hope that the Minister at the Dispatch Box will be driving an electric XJ immediately when they become available. It is good news for motor manufacturing at a time of Brexit uncertainty, and it is good news that the batteries will be manufactured at Hams Hall in Warwickshire and the motors will be built at JLR's engine complex in Wolverhampton. That provides many opportunities for the supply chain.

I mentioned the London Electric Vehicle Company. I am delighted that it is in my constituency. It has produced 2,500 vehicles at Anstey in my constituency, and there are almost 2,000 on the streets of London already. If you see a taxi rank now, there is a pretty good chance that more than half of the taxis will be electric. Each such taxi reduces the CO₂ emissions by 9.7 metric tonnes a year, compared with a diesel, and drivers can see savings of up to £100 a week because they no longer have to spend money on diesel.

One of the critical points about electric taxis is that for many people their first ever journey in an electric vehicle is in a taxi. It gives the taxi a pioneer role, and it is important that that is a good experience that people consider when they are purchasing. I was delighted to see the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt) driving a London taxi on the campaign trail only last week. We must encourage the switch, but the London Electric Vehicle Company has told me that lack of infrastructure is still a concern for drivers.

A second company in my constituency to benefit from the move to electric vehicles is Automotive Insulations. It is an important player and in many ways the go-to company for UK manufacturers in the supply of acoustic and thermal solutions. Acoustic material is what deadens the noise. In an internal combustion engine the acoustic material needs to deaden the sound of the engine, but the engine often masks other sounds, such as road noise, battery whine in electric vehicles and the noise made by other moving parts. So electric vehicles need different insulation material and Automotive Insulations is an expert in the field. It already supplies LEVC and the JLR I-PACE. It is also working on the new XJ. It has solutions designed for the Volvo Polestar, whose owners Geely also own LEVC, and is also working with Mercedes-Benz and BMW on developments. It is great to have its expertise in my constituency.

Grid infrastructure poses several challenges. An SME in my constituency provides extra power in the short term when there is inadequate power in the grid for people to recharge their vehicles. It supplies to two locations of interest, the first of which is Oxford Bus. Oxford has a low emissions zone. For visitors who want to tour the city and see the sights on a bus, Go Ahead needed to find a way to electrify its bus fleet. Its depot had insufficient power capacity and development would have taken too long and come at a prohibitive cost. Off Grid Energy in my constituency was able to provide a

[Mark Pawsey]

battery storage system to control the power available, limit the peak load on the network and store energy ready to recharge buses when they returned to the depot.

Off Grid Energy installed a similar system in Camden to provide power for a parcel delivery depot with 170 electric vans. If they all came back to the depot at the same time and wanted to recharge, there was not enough power in the grid, so Off Grid Energy's batteries draw down power over time, giving the capacity to recharge. Those opportunities will continue to arise.

Charging is the key to solving the problem, and we need to make sure that we build in enough charging facilities for the growth in the market, especially if our objective is to go all electric by 2032. Rugby is at the centre of England and at the crossroads of the motorway network. It is great news that junction 1 of the M6 is getting a brand new motorway services, operated by Moto. I have made it my business to look at the provision of electric charging at the new service area. We might think that a new motorway service area would be an ideal place to include an extensive range of charging for people on their journeys, halfway between Manchester and London, but when it opens in July next year it will have just two charging points. That is extraordinary, and I have talked to the operator, Moto. It has an ambition to have 24, but it will open with just two. That issue needs to be addressed and I hope that the Minister will talk about how National Grid and Western Power, the power provider, can provide what people will need.

1.14 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on opening the debate and the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) on his speech.

Our 2018 Joint Select Committee report on air quality began by setting out the impacts of air pollution, and they bear repeating. Some 40,000 lives across the country are cut short every year, with an annual cost to the UK of £20 billion. The health of babies, children, older people and those with existing medical conditions, including lung problems and asthma is put at great risk. We noted in that report that successive Governments had failed to act and violated our obligations to ensure safe, clean air to breathe. Of course, air pollution is just one of the environmental challenges that we face. I welcome the recognition in this place that we face a climate emergency, but it demands urgent and radical action to end our contribution to global carbon emissions. It is therefore particularly timely for us to debate the Government's plans to end the sale of new petrol and diesel cars.

Road transport is responsible for 80% of NOx emissions—air pollution—at the roadside, and 65% of the emissions come from diesel and petrol cars and vans. While there has been a significant reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions, that is primarily as a result of changes in energy generation. Progress on emissions from transport has been stuck in the slow lane. Not only have transport emissions not fallen in recent years but they rose between 2013 and 2017, and the sector is now the UK's largest generator of greenhouse gases, making up 27% of the total. Even though individual cars are becoming more fuel efficient and reducing their

individual emissions, that is far surpassed by the increase in the number of vehicles on our roads, which is getting higher and higher.

The case for action is clear. The Government's plans, however, are sadly lacking. The joint report welcomed the commitment to end the sale of new petrol and diesel cars, but the target date of 2040 is not ambitious enough. It is too distant to produce the step change that is needed in industry and local government planning and, as my hon. Friend has said, it lags behind the commitment made by other countries and car manufacturers. Norway has committed to selling only zero-emission vehicles by 2025 and a host of other countries have set the target of 2030. Even Scotland is on 2032.

The target is about banning the sale of vehicles. We know that the replacement of the whole vehicle fleet would take 10 to 15 years. If we aim for the end of the sale of vehicles only in 2040, we will have no hope of meeting zero carbon by 2050. Are we really prepared to wait 15 years after the end of the sale of vehicles to eliminate those vehicles that emit polluting carbon from our roads? I do not think that we are.

If we are to change the set-up, industry needs clarity on what will be required and when. There is undoubtedly an opportunity to move more quickly, as the Committee on Climate Change has recommended. The National Infrastructure Commission has called for a similar ban on the sale of new diesel HGVs by 2040. It is a real challenge to decarbonise our freight sector, but we should go faster and further where we can and we need more research on how we can do that.

Setting a more ambitious target of 2030, 2035 or even sooner is not enough in itself. The Government must also take steps to ensure that that target is met and that they have the policies to support businesses and people in the switch to cleaner vehicles. We know that many consumers are confused—the RAC's motoring survey has confirmed that—so clear guidance is needed. There are simple options such as vehicle labelling, which is very welcome and should be extended to, for instance, the second-hand market.

As has already been said, we need a rapid roll-out of charging infrastructure. The Government should work with National Grid in relation to electricity demand, and liaise with local authorities to identify the barriers and take steps to overcome them. Of course, the Government are themselves a major fleet provider, and are able to ensure that their fleets consist of cleaner and greener vehicles. However, as we start demanding that people use electric vehicles and do so rather more quickly, we should be conscious of social justice, especially when we know that clean air charging zones are being introduced in some of our most polluted towns and cities. The Government must act to help those who are least able to afford to replace polluting vehicles with ultra low emission vehicles. They should consider the role of scrappage schemes, and target support at low-income households and small businesses.

I must sound a note of caution about the limitations of this debate. Electric cars and vans are not a panacea, and they are not the whole answer to air pollution or the climate crisis. First, even electric cars' brakes and tyres produce dangerous particulates that have an impact on health, so simply changing to a cleaner vehicle is not the answer. Secondly, cars are not the only issue. I have

to say that in our air quality report, we largely neglected to consider the rail network. While it is not a significant contributor at a national level, we know that emissions from diesel trains pose a serious problem in stations and depots. The Government have talked about decarbonising the railway, but they are also still talking about bi-mode trains, which, when they are not under the wires, are simply diesel trains.

The most important point, I think, is that air pollution and carbon emissions are not our only challenges. Inactivity and obesity are huge public health challenges, and congestion is a blight in nearly all towns and cities. We could move from dirty, polluting traffic jams to clean, green traffic jams, and that would not be right. We need more people to get out of their cars and on to public transport—this is Catch the Bus Week, and low emission buses have an enormous role to play—but we need even more people to be walking and cycling. Some 60% of journeys of one to two miles are undertaken by car, and that has to change if we are serious about securing a happy, healthy future for our country. Yes, we need cleaner vehicles, but we need so much more.

1.22 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), who, as ever, advanced cogent arguments in support of electric vehicles.

Last month the House agreed unanimously to set a target of 2050 for net zero carbon emissions. Concern was expressed in some sections of the press that the decision had been made “on the nod”, and that insufficient thought had been given to how it would be delivered and the economic consequences. I hope this debate will show how wrong that concern is. There is not only a political awareness of the steps necessary to deliver our commitment, but the political will to take those steps, even if they require difficult decisions.

One of the difficult decisions that we must take is to bring forward the date by which the sale of new petrol and diesel cars and vans will end. That is supported by the Committee on Climate Change and, indeed, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, of which I am a member. I note that in addition to our call, similar requests have been made by four other Committees, which have cited the impact on health and air quality as well as the environment, and the need to support low-carbon industries. I am delighted that the Conservative Environment Network has joined those calls, asking for a 2035 target.

The price of electric vehicles is expected to reach parity with that of internal combustion engine-powered cars by the mid-2020s—not on some far-flung date in the future, but in just a couple of years. A little further down the line, in the 2030s, sales of electric vehicles are expected to overtake petrol and diesel sales. There are now more electric vehicle charging locations in the UK than petrol stations. Despite that milestone, however, the network is not fit for purpose, as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), and poor provision of charging infrastructure is one of the main barriers to the growth of the market.

As it said in its report last year, the BEIS Committee found that my region contained just 244 publicly funded charging points, which equates to nearly 29,000 people

per point. Although that is substantially better than the ratio across the border in Wales, where there are 98,806 people per charging point, it pales in comparison with the ratio in the north-east, where the figure is fewer than 4,000 people. Those three regions, which stretch across the UK, demonstrate the serious risk that access to sufficient charging points will become a postcode lottery, with someone from Newcastle standing a far better chance of being able to charge an electric vehicle than someone from Newport, Newquay or Knutsford.

A visible and extensive network of ultra-fast chargers is not just good for existing electric vehicle owners. Our Committee heard evidence that

“The principle reason people are put off buying an EV, is no longer range anxiety, but the lack of a viable national/urban Rapid Charger infrastructure.”

We also need to think more carefully about how to standardise the infrastructure. If we are to develop an electric vehicle network that mirrors the advantages of petrol cars, we need to ensure that all EVs and charging points are inter-operable. That does not just mean that charging points need to charge all EVs; it means that data and information sharing must be standard as well.

I recognise that the passage of the Automated and Electric Vehicles Act 2018 has empowered the Government to take the necessary steps, but, as the report states, they will require full use of the powers in the Act to deliver a network of this kind. That is why I am troubled that they have handed responsibility for the development of this vital national infrastructure to local authorities. That would not happen with HS2 or Crossrail. Local authorities have demonstrated that they have a big role to play in this project, but why do we expect them to deliver such a vital network with limited Government support and oversight?

I welcome the Government's acceptance of our recommendation for planning guidance on the number of charging points installed in new buildings, which will help local authorities, but the Government need to recognise their responsibilities and take a lead in co-ordinating the financial and technical support that councils need to build charging infrastructure. Failing to do that will imperil the future of the entire electric vehicle sector.

Only yesterday, I received an email from a constituent about that very issue. He rightly pointed out:

“Given the importance of changing to electric cars in line with the Government's climate change policy, I am amazed that building regulations only required the installation of a 16amp consumer unit in our detached garage which was built with our house only 18 months ago. This is insufficient to power a 7kw charger which requires a 32amp supply. As from July 1, in order to meet OLEV's grant requirements a minimum of a 7kw charger must be installed—a 3.6kw/16amp charger is no longer allowed. Given the huge cost involved in increasing the amperage of a consumer box—i.e. cabling & trenching etc.—this may well prove to be a deterrent to purchasing an electric car.”

Unless our regulations are forward-thinking and focused on the future, there will be a risk of each generation of electric vehicle adopters being left behind in just a matter of years, which would fracture the user base and deter new entrants. That is doubly true in rural areas such as my constituency. All too often, the latest and greatest technology, from Uber to Deliveroo, has been rolled out in cities, only for my constituents to look on enviously as we wait for the once or sometimes twice-daily diesel bus.

[Antoinette Sandbach]

I have set out some concerns about how the green revolution might leave rural communities behind in a book, “Britain Beyond Brexit”, edited by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman). I would strongly support Ministers should they adopt the recommendation of CEN, the European Committee for Standardisation, for there to be a right to request an electric vehicle charging point. That would give rural communities a chance to show that there is the demand necessary to make one viable. I would also be grateful if Ministers focused more heavily on how to build EV infrastructure for those who live and work in rural areas rather than just for those who travel through those areas as they go from big city to big city—after all, it will not be possible to decarbonise our country unless we decarbonise countryside.

If we can decarbonise our transport sector, the prize on offer is substantial: we would not only meet our climate change targets, but see improvements in health and air quality while supporting the British car industry, which is the jewel in our manufacturing crown.

A high-tech, clean future is possible, but unless Ministers help local authorities deliver the charging infrastructure, we risk being left behind as the rest of the world rushes to embrace this technology, and our world-leading position could be squandered by a lack of co-ordination.

1.30 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing this debate and commend him on what he said about the experience of driving an electric vehicle. He is also right that ambitious targets are important if road transport is to make the contribution it needs to if we are to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. But he rightly spent a lot of his time also talking about pathways to get there, because no target, however ambitious, implements itself: it requires action.

We have a mixed picture in that regard, however. There is good news: there was an increase of nearly 30% in the sales of alternatively fuelled vehicles last year. But more sobering is the fact that alternatively fuelled vehicles still account for only 6% of new vehicle sales, and electric vehicles—battery electric—and fuel cell vehicles account for just 0.7%. It is clear that a step-change is needed in the take-up of such vehicles if we are to meet the targets envisaged by the Committee on Climate Change that my hon. Friend talked about. That means that people need to feel confident enough about driving an alternatively fuelled vehicle.

The fact is, however, that anxiety about running out of power is still a barrier to both private and fleet buyers in making the shift to electric. The good news is that the range of electric vehicle batteries is growing exponentially. I am pleased to say that the Government have been more proactive than before in providing investment to speed up research and development to further advance battery technology here in the UK, but we are late to the game compared with some other countries, and I say to the Minister that a lot more needs to be done to stimulate that.

As has been said, infrastructure is a key part of the picture. Again, there are some welcome initiatives. The fact that we now have legislation in place allowing the Government to mandate provision and inter-operability of rapid charging points is good, but there is so much more yet to do if we are to achieve the step-change in charging infrastructure necessary to provide the confidence for a step-change in the take-up of electric and other alternatively fuelled vehicles. That must include providing answers about who is going to pay for the investment in the charging infrastructure at the scale needed and who is going to maintain it; my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) made that point earlier. It also requires tackling the issue of how to enable home charging, particularly for those who do not have off-street parking. We also need to see a lot more activism from the Government on the grid: how to avoid overload and how to make it easier for vehicles to become energy sources as well as energy users, given that the majority of their time is spent parked rather than on the move.

If people are to make the shift to electric, they also need to be able to afford to do so, and the price of new electric vehicles is still beyond the reach of most people. Solving that is not entirely within the gift of Government, but Government can help with the right consumer incentives. Ministers say that the fact that the numbers of electric vehicles and other alternatively fuelled vehicles being sold has gone up means that they can cut back on the plug-in car grant for electric vehicles and scrap it entirely in the case of plug-in hybrids. However, this market is still fragile and volatile—my hon. Friend the Member for Hove made that point very well—and customer incentives help stimulate both private sales and, crucially, the fleet market, whose turnover in new EVs is critical to driving the used car market, in which most motorists buy their cars. I say to the Minister that now is not the time to be reducing those customer incentives.

The pathway to net zero is not only about how to make sure there is a step-change in the number of alternatively fuelled vehicles on the road; it is also about the transition and how to ensure that on the way there the petrol and diesel vehicles on the roads are as clean as they can be to protect air quality and produce as little CO₂ as possible. The good news is that a great amount has already been achieved in that regard. Technological advances mean that emissions from new vehicles on the road are just a fraction of what they were just a few years ago. But the picture is not all positive: last year, aggregate CO₂ emissions from new cars rose for the first time in a decade. That happened not because the environmental performance of new vehicles has taken a dip; average new car CO₂ emissions are 31% lower than in 2000. The biggest factor has been a nearly 30% drop in the sale of new diesels.

That drop is partly a consequence of the injury the automotive industry inflicted on itself through the VW dieselgate scandal, but it is also partly a result of the confused messages that have been coming out of Government about newer diesel engines—not least in the vehicle excise duty regime, which penalises the cleanest diesels on the road while leaving older dirtier diesels untouched. Little wonder, then, that both private motorists and companies leasing new vehicles have delayed plans to replace vehicles, with detrimental consequences for both CO₂ and air quality.

There are lessons for the Government here about the need to end those confused messages, and those lessons particularly need to be learned in the approaching comprehensive spending review. I urge the Minister to look again at vehicle excise duty rates in relation not only to the supplement on new diesels, but, even more significantly, to the impact on vehicle taxes if the worldwide harmonised light vehicle test procedure, or WLTP, is applied unchanged to current VED rates. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders estimates that consumers would face an increase in costs totalling about £500 million, based on the size of the current new car market, if WLTP figures are applied to current rates of VED. It is difficult to see how that could add up to anything other than a depression in sales, and the sales that would be hit would be those of the most environmentally efficient conventionally powered vehicles.

We must also remember that if sales are down, that hits the health of the automotive sector, which is already rocked by the uncertainties of Brexit. If the industry is hit, the pace of investment in developing new generations of alternatively fuelled vehicles is also hit, undermining the very thing we are trying to achieve in the first place.

My plea to the Minister is to listen to what the sector is saying, to make sure that the policies adopted on vehicle taxation support rather than damage the market for cleaner petrol and diesel vehicles, and to support rather than damage the sector's ability to invest in the way that is needed to enable the shift to electric and other alternatively fuelled and zero emission vehicles: by making them a more realistic and attractive option for many more people than they are now.

1.38 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) for introducing this timely debate so well.

Using phrases that I hope will soon be consigned to the history books I want in my remarks to encourage the Minister to get the revs up, to find the bite and to accelerate our action on ending the sale of new petrol and diesel engines, and I want to speak very briefly about the three C's in relation to this: the crisis, the context, and then the choice that we have.

We all know about the crisis: the climate crisis that this Parliament declared put clearly on the political agenda that we must take bolder, swifter and more radical action. That has happened in language, but not yet in deeds. We need Ministers to be bolder and swifter. I welcome the announcement that we will achieve net zero—that is a good ambition—but I am concerned that it is at risk of falling into the trap of being easy to say and hard to match. That is why we need to ensure that people find it easier to say “net zero” than “Paris climate change commitments” and that the actions are commensurate with that greater ambition. We must be much more honest about the enormous economy-transforming fundamental changes that are required to deliver net zero, not many years away but now, if we are to do that.

We are already missing out on our fourth and fifth carbon budgets as a country, and although the Ministers in the Department heap praise on achieving the carbon budgets as we are now, we need to do more heavy lifting to achieve those fourth and fifth carbon budgets, as was

required before the net zero commitment, and now that we have that commitment, we must go faster still. That means reappraising policies made before the net zero announcement, and that must mean bringing forward the date for ending the use of petrol and diesel engines.

The context is also important. We are lagging behind our friends and other countries in banning petrol and diesel engines, and we are slower than many of our peers in rolling out hybrid, hydrogen and electric vehicle charging points, but it does not need to be that way. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hove has said, we are already a global leader in this area, so we are at risk of throwing away that natural advantage.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) said, we need to be clear on the two dates in this debate: the date for banning the sale of new petrol and diesel engines and the date on which there can be no more use of diesel and petrol engines on our roads in Britain. The Government are lacking ambition on both those dates, and I encourage the Minister to bring them forward. We cannot afford to wait until 2040 and 2050 in that respect. We must be bolder in our ambition, and that means not only putting forward an ambitious date but ensuring that that date is legally binding, because I do not want this simply to be a mission, as outlined by Ministers in 2018. I do not want it to be a vague hope or a chance encounter with reality. I want it to be a legally binding date that will focus the minds of industry and ensure that the Government of the day have a plan to incentivise the early retirement of these engines and ensure that EV charging points become the norm nationwide and not just in areas of best practice.

There is another element that we have not mentioned so far, and that is autonomy. By the early 2020s, more and more cars on our roads will be autonomous. They will not have a driver in charge of them. As we get into the 2030s, nearly all our cars will be autonomous, and they will be electric, as they should be. That is what must happen here, but it will mean a fundamental change. That autonomy will change the way we interact with our vehicles—cars, buses, trucks and vans—and we need to be clear that autonomy is in many cases quite scary. My hon. Friend the Member for Hove spoke about the fear of going into an electric vehicle for the first time, and many people will certainly fear using an autonomous electric vehicle, but they will reduce accidents and, in theory, create greater capacity on our roads.

We will have more cars on our roads, however, because at the moment we only have cars travelling on our roads with people in them. That sounds like a very basic point, but with autonomous vehicles, we will have cars, vans, trucks and buses on our roads with not a single person in them. The number of cars on our roads will also increase due to population change. I support the measures to encourage more people to walk, run, cycle and use public transport, but we must be honest and acknowledge that in many parts of the country, public transport systems do not have the volume and frequency necessary to achieve that change. That is why we need to recognise that the greater number of vehicles on our roads must be matched by a reduction in petrol and diesel engines.

In the 2107 general election, I put forward the idea of extending the M5 from Exeter to Plymouth to ensure that Plymouth can harness jobs and investment

[*Luke Pollard*]

opportunities. I am glad that Labour Front Benchers have committed to undertake a study of that extension when in power, but we must be sure that it is accompanied by the quid pro quo of ensuring that no diesel or petrol engines are used on the motorway extension. We need to take action on climate change, while recognising that there will be an increase in the amount of cars on our roads.

In relation to the points raised earlier, I just want to add one thing. It is about how we deal with planting. This is not directly about petrol and diesel engines, but rubber crumb and brake pad emissions must also be built into this process, and if we are re-engineering and reimagining our whole transport system based on more electric engines and on ending diesel and petrol use, we need to be more inventive about how we plant alongside our roads. We need taller trees, mid-level bushes and low-level shrubs to capture particulates, to muffle noise and to ensure that there is a carbon offset.

All these things can be done if we have the ambition to do them, and I know that the general public want politicians to have more ambition here, so I ask the Minister to please bring forward the date to end the sale of diesel and petrol engines and to make it legally binding, so that the entire country can know that there will be no more diesel and petrol engines used on our roads.

1.44 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing it, and I thank those hon. Members who have pushed for it. The Government have finally acknowledged that there is a climate crisis, but the 2050 net zero emission target and the ending of sales of fossil fuel vehicles in 2040 are too late. I support the movers of this debate in proposing to bring forward the date at which we stop selling new diesel and petrol cars to 2030. The shift does not just impact on our CO₂ emissions; many people across the country, including many in my constituency, are exposed to toxic air, and they want to see changes. Tens of thousands of people are dying from air pollution now, and the poorest people in society are being affected the most by air pollution.

Last week, I had the pleasure of joining the London Mayor, Sadiq Khan, in unveiling the Chiswick oasis, a 400-foot screen wall that protects St Mary's Primary School and William Hogarth Primary School in Chiswick from the toxic air from the A4 next door. People from across the community came together and showed that they want to see action to stop the air pollution epidemic. Mayor Sadiq Khan has also introduced London's ultra-low emission zone, which is set to reduce air pollution in central London by 45%, and his leadership in implementing low and zero emission bus fleets is already showing significant reductions in pollutants on roads such as Chiswick High Road.

We need to see national leadership now, however, and I come back to the type of fuels that cars, vans and other vehicles are using. We have to speed up the production and use of electric vehicles as a proportion of the fleet mix. We also have to help people to make changes to make this happen. Let us make it easier to

scrap older and polluting cars through a Government-funded wide-scale scrappage scheme for polluting vehicles, to bring some income equality into the change that is needed, and let us have more electric car charging points. The Government provide some grants to plug-in vehicles and support for the roll-out of electric charging points based at home and at work, but for commercial vehicles—this debate is about vans as well as cars—and for users who are driving for most of the day, probably for work, fast charging points are essential.

Last month, research showed that there are just under 9,000 public charging points in the UK, of which only 1,500 are rapid charging points—those that can recharge a car battery to 80% in around half an hour. The roll-out of public and particularly rapid charge points needs to run ahead of the supply of new electric vehicles; otherwise, the demand for new electric vehicles will slow down. Overall, 29,000 charging points will be needed across Britain by 2030, of which about 85% will need to be either fast, 22 kW, chargers or rapid chargers, which are more than 43 kW. This will need Government help, such as grants to install rapid charge points, particularly in the less commercially viable places away from the town centres and major roads where there is a business case that is quite easy to prove for those schemes. We need schemes similar to the home charging and workplace schemes that are already in place for standard charging.

Tesla has raised a different concern with me: not a shortage of grants in this case, but our ancient common law. Tesla has a showroom in my constituency, and I was able to drive one of its cars to the West Drayton depot a few miles up the A4. I can say to my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle): yes, it was fun. Tesla is concerned because high-voltage cables will need to be installed for the rapid charging points, and our ancient wayleave laws make it difficult to run high-power cables across private land. The more landowners there are, the more complicated the process becomes. I am sure that the Government are addressing this.

Moving on, I share the note of caution mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), who chairs the Transport Committee on which I serve. While the shift to electric vehicles will reduce our CO₂ emissions, she noted that it does not answer the problem. Some of the particulates that pollute our urban environment, such as those from brake linings and tyres, will still be present even with electric vehicles, so we do need to address that issue and put in more mitigation where we cannot get away from using vehicles.

I have concerns about the assumption that we are talking about a straight switch from one type of private car to another. We are still over-dependent on large, single-person metal boxes on wheels to get around. However private cars are powered, they still take up room, cause congestion, emit harmful particulates and are expensive to own. Car use among young people has been in decline over the past 20 years, and that is set to continue. Cars militate against using active forms of travel that keep us fitter and are cheaper. We could do so much more to reduce our dependence on private cars and vans to make our cities and towns more sustainable and pleasant places to live.

Urban areas have seen a bigger roll-out of battery-powered cargo bikes, which can move quite large loads around our cities and could be used much more with Government incentives. We need to get on low-emission

buses and cycle and walk more, and the Government could do more to provide cheap and easy alternatives, particularly for sub-three-mile journeys. Buses play a key role in helping us to reduce our dependence on the private car, but as the Transport Committee has found, 3,000 bus routes have been axed since 2010 and subsidies have fallen by £20 million in the past year, following cuts to local government grants.

In London and other cities, many people want to cycle for short journeys, but we need dedicated cycle lanes, better cycling infrastructure, such as storage, and stronger laws to protect cyclists. The Government need to ramp up the amount of investment in cycling infrastructure.

Finally, by moving forward the deadline for net zero CO₂ emissions, we need to inject much-needed urgency into the policy. The clearest message that I have heard from the hundreds of people who have contacted me about climate change is that they want us to take urgent action. They do not want just more warm words; they want us to take the lead. Let us put the UK at the front of the global fight against climate change and air pollution by taking much bolder steps.

1.52 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It really is a pleasure to speak in this debate today, because it is on an issue of great importance not only to our environmental commitments, but to the continued success of the UK's automotive industry. As people will no doubt be aware, because I bang on about it, it is also important to my constituency, which is home to Nissan's UK car plant. Just last month, the plant became the first in the UK to build its 10 millionth vehicle—an astonishing achievement and a real testament to the efficiency of the facility and the dedication of the workers.

Despite that good news, the overall picture for the automotive industry is worrying. A decline in sales of diesel vehicles, continuing uncertainty over Brexit, fears of a no-deal outcome, and the shift towards electric cars and autonomous vehicles are just some of the key factors that have led some in the sector to describe the current situation as a crisis. According to the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, British car production fell for the 12th month in a row in May as output dropped to 15.5%. It is now clearer than ever that we need an urgent resolution to the ongoing Brexit stalemate and one that avoids the UK crashing out without a deal, which would be disastrous for the automotive industry.

While we must recognise the challenge that the transition towards electric vehicles presents to the automotive industry, it is important to see it as a great opportunity. Climate change is rightly back on the top of the political agenda, partly due to recent protests, including last week's successful "The Time is Now" mass lobby. The deadly heatwave that swept across Europe last week should also focus our minds on tackling this issue. According to scientists, it was at least five times, and possibly a hundred times, more likely because of climate change.

As the shadow Public Health Minister, I am hugely concerned by illegal and harmful levels of air pollution across the UK, especially here in the capital. Air pollution damages the health of millions of people and is hugely

dangerous for children, babies, older people, and those with existing health conditions. Successfully transitioning to electric vehicles is just one way of combating the climate crisis.

Nissan has been leading the way in developing EVs and the battery technology upon which they rely. The Nissan Leaf, made in my constituency, was the best-selling EV in Europe last year. The plant in Washington is also the only volume car manufacturer making a pure battery EV and has the first UK battery plant. Disappointingly, uptake of EVs in the UK lags behind other European countries, and the Government must be held partly responsible. They have failed to create an environment in which the EV market can thrive. Grants for EVs have been cut, and investment in the charging infrastructure has been insufficient, as we have heard from several hon. Members.

Perhaps most importantly of all, the Government continue to hold an unambitious phase-out date for new petrol and diesel models of 2040. By comparison, Norway's target is for all vehicles sold to be low emission by 2025, the Netherlands and Sweden are aiming for 2030, and Scotland's target is 2032. Although opinions vary on what the target should be, many in the industry have told me that the sector could absolutely cope with our target being brought forward to, say, 2035. The Committee on Climate Change recently called for the sale of new petrol and diesel cars to be banned by 2030, so does the Minister agree with the CCC?

If companies such as Nissan are to build on their successes by producing and selling EVs, the right conditions must be in place for consumers to feel comfortable about making that transition. Two of the key barriers to consumer uptake are concerns around sufficient charging infrastructure and the high price of purchasing an EV compared with a petrol or diesel vehicle. Last year, the Government cut the grant for EVs from £4,500 to £3,500, which Labour strongly opposed. We simply cannot expect people, many of whom were encouraged to buy diesel cars not that long ago, to be able to afford new EVs when they can cost up to £10,000 more than a petrol or diesel vehicle. Even if they cost less to run over time, that initial outlay is the barrier.

As for charging infrastructure, Sunderland is well served, as is the north-east as a whole, as the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) pointed out. I attended the launch of our new Fastned charging station in Sunderland just last month, for example. As she said, the current market-led approach could lead to an unequal and inefficient distribution of charging points, and if the Government expect consumers to make the change to electric, they need to set out a national strategic infrastructure plan for charging points and further support individuals with home charging.

Although it is welcome that, as of 1 July, all electric car charge points installed via the official homecharge scheme must now have smart features, that means that chargers installed outside of the scheme will not have to be smart. In order for the electricity grid to ever be able to cope with this new future of high levels of EV charging, the systems in place need to be as efficient and smart as possible, not only in homes, but in workplaces and public locations.

The SMMT published figures today showing that the UK car market is in decline for the fourth consecutive month and that alternatively fuelled vehicle demand fell

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

for the first time in 26 months. It is clear that the EV market in the UK can thrive with the right conditions in place, and the Government should be ensuring that the transition away from petrol and diesel vehicles is seen as an opportunity by all.

1.59 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I congratulate the sponsors of today's debate on securing time to discuss this important issue.

I start in a similar vein to the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) by declaring, or admitting, my love of cars, driving and motorsport—not just Formula 1 but all kinds of motorsport. Perhaps worst of all, I own a 2.2 litre diesel car but, not just for the purposes of this debate, I am looking to change it as soon as possible.

Earlier this year, Scotland's First Minister declared that

"there is a climate emergency. And Scotland will live up to our responsibility to tackle it."

That means real and practical action across our whole society in how we go about our daily lives, and it means a positive role for Government in building up the infrastructure and support available to us all as we transition to a low-carbon economy. In Scotland we are creating the infrastructure that the future requires.

The UK Government's words are warm, but their actions get nowhere near to matching them. As we have heard, Scotland aims to phase out fossil fuel-based vehicles by 2032, eight years ahead of this Government's current plans. The average distance to the nearest charging point in Scotland is fully one third less than the UK figure, despite our much smaller population density, and we lead the world in our commitment to carbon neutrality by 2045, five years ahead of the UK Government's commitments. Our commitment is clear, and our transition to a low-carbon society is well under way.

The Scottish Government have invested in one of the most comprehensive and widespread charging networks in Europe, with nearly 1,000 publicly available charging points. That is a great start but, obviously, there is much more to do. Another 1,500 charging points are in the pipeline through Scottish Government funding, and work on the first ever electric trunk road is well under way. The plans for the electric A9 are not only ambitious but are a transformational game changer and will turbo-boost the capacity and coverage of electric vehicles across a huge swathe of Scotland, including in communities where going electric simply has not been feasible or practical until now.

To put it in context, the A9 is Scotland's longest road and stretches 273 miles from beginning to end. It serves as Scotland's spinal road, linking the central belt to the highlands, passing through one of Europe's fastest-growing and, in my view, best cities, Inverness. It also connects some of the most sparsely populated areas of Scotland.

Vehicles will be able to come off the Orkney ferry—an apt starting point given Orkney's world-leading marine energy research programme—and be charged while overlooking John o' Groats, before travelling the length of Scotland from Tain to Tomatin, from Dingwall to Dunkeld, and from Pitlochry to Perth using renewable,

clean energy over every mile. Such practical action is needed across these islands to play a part in tackling the climate emergency we all face.

It is also instructive to look at what our neighbours in Norway have done. This year will see electric vehicles make up a majority of new car registrations in Norway, a world first, after years of already leading the way on electric car take-up. Electric car sales in Norway, with a population not dissimilar to Scotland's, already outstrip those in the UK, with a population 11 times the size, and are forecast to grow further.

Norway is an energy-rich, progressive, independent country with the sovereign power to take the kind of radical action needed to promote low-carbon transport. The lessons for Scotland could not be clearer. In contrast, the UK Government's track record on low-carbon transition has been nothing short of abysmal. The scrapping of plans for carbon capture and storage at Peterhead shows the lack of good faith on offer. The Tories' 2015 manifesto was clear in pledging £1 billion for carbon capture and storage, which they ditched six months later. Perhaps if the plant had been due to be built in a Democratic Unionist party constituency, we might have seen a tad more support from the Government.

The report of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee could not be clearer about the importance of CCS, saying that

"the UK could not credibly adopt a 'net zero emissions' target in line with the Paris Agreement's 1.5° C aspiration."

The report demands that the UK Government

"move away from vague and ambiguous targets and give a clear policy direction to ensure the UK seizes the industrial and decarbonisation benefits of carbon capture usage and storage".

If the UK Government do not want to seize those benefits, instead preferring to fall further behind the rest of the world, they should not drag Scotland down with them. Time after time, we have seen this Government, who have the power to drive real change, do very little to use that power. The Scottish Government, in contrast, are forced to weave their way through the Scotland Acts to show real ambition by setting targets and then meeting them.

We have seen the solar feed-in tariff scrapped, casting asunder an industry beginning to make real inroads and achieve critical mass. We have seen total underinvestment in our electricity grid, resulting in our power infrastructure creaking as more and more renewables come on stream. Much worse, we have seen the continued farce of clean, renewable energy from Scotland, particularly the north and the highlands, being penalised with exorbitant transmission charges, while gas and coal-fired power stations in the south of England carry on regardless. The decarbonisation of transport and the roll-out of electric vehicles now, alas, seems to be facing similar gridlock. This Government are stuck in first gear, meandering in the slow lane and being overtaken by the rest of the world, including the EU countries on which they want to turn their back.

I very much agree with the hon. Member for Hove and others in calling on the UK Government to recognise the leadership that the Scottish Government have shown over the years on electric vehicles and decarbonisation overall, and to ensure that we have the powers to work, as Norway has, towards a carbon-free transport network in preparation for joining Norway as a modern, progressive, independent European state.

2.5 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing and introducing this incredibly important debate, the context of which is the climate crisis and this Government's failure to respond to it with any real ambition.

As my hon. Friend mentioned at the outset, while we have been debating the issue the BBC has reported that sales of low emission cars have fallen for the first time in more than two years—I think I am right in saying that sales have fallen by 4.9% on last year.

The Committee on Climate Change, the Government's own advisory body, has stated that the UK is “way off track” on meeting its own carbon emission targets in the 2020s and 2030s. Those targets were set under the Climate Change Act 2008 introduced by the previous Labour Government.

The Government are even further off track on their Paris climate change agreement commitments, to which we must adhere if we are to have a chance of avoiding catastrophic climate change impacts. Transport is the worst performing sector of the economy. It accounts for a third of all carbon dioxide emissions and is now the UK's largest source of greenhouse gas. Emissions are just 3% lower than in 1990, and they have risen since Labour left office in 2010.

Although vehicle technology has improved, reductions in transport emissions have been frustrated by growth in vehicle miles travelled on our roads. Between 1990 and 2018, vehicle miles travelled on our roads increased by 28% to 328 billion a year. If the Government wish to reduce transport emissions, in line with the UK's targets, they must reduce the number of vehicle miles travelled on roads, which means giving greater support to public transport and active travel to encourage fewer car journeys. Unfortunately, the Government are heading in the wrong direction, with rising car use and falling public transport use.

We must decarbonise road transport by transitioning to electric vehicles and decarbonising the production of the electricity on which those vehicles rely. Reducing vehicle miles travelled on roads and switching to electric would also address poor air quality, which is the largest environmental risk to public health in the UK, as long-term exposure to air pollution can cause chronic conditions such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases and lung cancer, which lead to reduced life expectancy. We know that poor air quality is responsible for between 30,000 and 50,000 premature deaths in the UK each year, and the Environmental Audit Committee estimates that the total health cost of air pollution ranges between £8.5 billion and £20.2 billion a year.

In order to improve air quality, it is necessary to reduce the number of vehicle miles travelled on roads in areas of poor air quality, to transition to electric vehicles and to improve internal combustion engine technology. The Government have not been doing these things, as evidenced by the fact that the UK has been unlawfully breaching nitrogen dioxide limits since 2010. Road transport is responsible for some 80% of roadside NO₂ concentrations, but the Government air quality strategy dodged road transport and instead focused on wood-burning stoves. The Government should understand that their failure to invest now will have damaging long-term economic,

social and environmental costs. The climate crisis and the air pollution crisis require bold and immediate action, which is not forthcoming from the Government.

The motion that we are debating is right to bring to our attention the lack of progress and ambition on electric vehicles. By international standards, the Government's current phase-out date is unambitious. No country that has adopted a phase-out date for the sale of new diesel and petrol vans and cars has chosen a date later than 2040. Norway has a phase-out date of 2025, while Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands all have a phase-out date of 2030. The Government's commitment that all new cars and vans will be effectively zero emission is also vague. The policy should be more ambitious and should require vehicles to be fully, rather than effectively, zero emission.

Phase-out dates are important, because they give manufacturers, businesses and consumers the clarity they need to inform the investments they will have to make. The view that the UK should have a more ambitious phase-out date is shared by the cross-party Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, whose report “Electric vehicles: driving the transition” recommended a date of 2032.

Although phase-out dates are important, what matters in reducing vehicle emissions is to ensure that as many as possible of the vehicle miles travelled on UK roads are completed in electric vehicles, as soon as possible. A phase-out date in and of itself will not ensure that that happens, which is why it is vital that the Government provide the necessary support to accelerate the transition. That means breaking down the barriers that are frustrating the growth of the EV market, and cost is one of the most important discouraging factors. I speak as the owner of a little Renault Twizy, which is completely electric.

Market projections suggest that EVs could reach price equivalence with internal combustion engine vehicles by the mid-2020s. In the meantime, however, financial incentives will be required to help to bridge the gap if the Government are to deliver on their ambition of growing the EV market. Vehicle costs remain a major barrier to EV uptake in the UK. The up-front cost of most electric vehicles is substantially higher; they cost up to £10,000 more than their internal combustion engine equivalents, even after the Government support.

I am heeding your instruction and advice to me earlier, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wanted to mention a few other points, especially the Government fleet, private fleets and the industrial strategy, but given the time constraints, I shall leave my remarks there.

2.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): I pay tribute to all hon. Members who have contributed to today's debate, especially the mover of the motion, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), who eloquently set out the joy of driving an EV and spoke about the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee's work in this area; the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), who chairs the Transport Committee and has considerable expertise; and my hon. Friends the Members for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), who also played important roles on the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

[*Andrew Stephenson*]

Committee inquiry into electric vehicles last year. I am also delighted that the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) was able to contribute, never missing an opportunity to remind us that the Nissan UK car plant is in her constituency. I will try to address many of the points that were raised in the debate, but given the time constraints, I hope Members will accept that I will have to limit the number of interventions I take in order to allow time for the next—very emotional—debate on assisted dying.

The dangers of climate change are helping to drive a revolution in road vehicles, and everyone who spoke today shares the Government's ambition that the UK should lead the way. We can all be proud of the fact that on 27 June, the Government set a legally binding target for the UK to achieve net zero by 2050, making us the first major economy in the world to legislate for a net zero target and continuing a proud tradition of leadership when it comes to tackling climate change. Achieving that target will mean working together across political lines and encompassing all parts of society. We will need clear, considered strategies, backed up by action.

Let me be clear from the outset that the Government and I share the ambition of all colleagues from across the House to have all new vehicles delivering as many zero emission miles as possible, as fast as possible. As has been said, the current targets are that by 2040, all new cars and vans will be effectively zero emission; and that by 2050, almost every car and van in the UK will be zero emission. We set out clear steps towards achieving the 2040 target in our strategy "The Road to Zero", which was published almost exactly a year ago. We believe that 2040 is an ambitious but achievable target, which represents the right balance between environmental ambitions and deliverability, recognising the need for a period in which industry can develop the necessary products and we can address some of the barriers about which hon. Members have talked at length today.

Lilian Greenwood: Does the Minister recognise that it takes 10 to 15 years to replace the fleet completely? If we do not end the sale of new petrol and diesel vehicles until 2040, we will simply not be able to decarbonise transport by 2050. How will he address that issue?

Andrew Stephenson: I will come on to that, but I think we are making good progress on a range of fronts, although significant barriers remain. Our wider commitments on climate change have been bold, and we have achieved a faster reduction in our carbon emissions than any other country in the G20 has done. There is no reason why we cannot go faster than the targets that we have set ourselves. Meeting those targets requires an adequate supply of ultra low emission vehicles, a strong consumer base and a fit-for-purpose infrastructure network.

Government cannot deliver our ambitions alone. At the heart of our strategy is a commitment to working in partnership with industry, business, academia, environmental groups, devolved administrations, local Government, consumers and international partners. We need new charge points in homes, workplaces and public places. The consumer experience of public charging needs to be improved. The system must be easy to use,

affordable, efficient and reliable. That is why we passed the Automated and Electric Vehicles Act 2018, which allows us to regulate further in this area; that is why on Monday the Prime Minister asked OLEV to undertake a review, setting out our vision for a core national network of rapid charge points along the country's key roads; and it is why we are encouraging people to charge at home overnight, both on and off street.

On Tuesday this week, I attended a roundtable convened at 10 Downing Street with companies such as Jaguar Land Rover, LEVC, Tesla, PSA and the National Grid to discuss how we can best build on our core infrastructure network for electric vehicles in the UK. Those who were present were supportive of Government schemes, such as the up-front £500 off the cost of installing a domestic charge point; the provision of grants to businesses for workplace charge points; and the provision of grant funding to local authorities to install charge points for residents who lack off-street parking. We accept that we need to go further and faster; for example, by ensuring that all new homes are electric vehicle ready. We will soon consult on requiring every new home to have a charge point where appropriate.

We are already in a strong position. Government funding and leadership, alongside private sector investment, has supported the installation of more than 20,000 public charge points to date. That includes more than 2,000 rapid charge points—one of the largest networks in Europe. We want to build on that and encourage private sector investment to build and operate a self-sustaining public network.

Overall, we are investing nearly £1.5 billion between 2015 and 2021 to support ultra low emission vehicles and address the barriers to uptake. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) mentioned, we have grants available to offset the up-front cost of ultra low emission vehicles, which currently cost more than petrol or diesel equivalents. As an incentive to make the switch, our plug-in grants offer up to £3,500 off the purchase price of an electric car, up to £7,500 for a taxi and up to £8,000 for a van. We are also funding the development of new cleaner technologies. With £300 million of funding from OLEV, we are supporting vehicle manufacturers, technology companies and academia to deliver a major programme of research and development in the UK.

I am pleased to say that a year on from the publication of our strategy "The Road to Zero", we are making progress against our ambitions. In 2018, the UK was the second largest market in the EU for ultra low emission vehicles, and there are now more than 200,000 of them on our roads. We are also building in large numbers—last year, one in five electric cars sold in Europe was made in the UK—and I am proud to say that Europe's best-selling electric vehicle, the Nissan Leaf, was made in Sunderland, as the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West mentioned.

Let us not forget that this sector is hugely important to the UK economy: with a £77.9 billion turnover, it directly employs 165,000 in manufacturing alone. As someone from the north of England, that is particularly important to me. Manufacturing is still a major employer in my constituency, with companies such as Wardle Storeys, part of Uniroyal Global, employing more than 150 people in Earby, making automotive components. That is why I am keen to see the industry's rapid evolution, rather

than revolution, supported by our automotive sector deal, which was published last year. As I speak, the Automotive Council, which I would have attended were it not for this debate, is meeting just down the road.

It has been a real privilege of my role to see at first hand some of the technologies and innovations that are already delivering for us on the Road to Zero. Just last week, I visited the BMW Mini plant in Oxford, and I have also visited Bentley in Crewe; the Advanced Propulsion Centre in Coventry, where I got to sit in—they would not let me drive it—the first all-electric Aston Martin, which will be built in St Athan, south Wales; and McLaren in Wokingham. We are supporting innovation in the sector, with the Advanced Propulsion Centre, the Faraday battery challenge and the connected and autonomous vehicles programme, focusing on the key technologies that will drive the global transition to low-carbon mobility and form the basis of future vehicle supply chains in the UK.

Battery technologies are of course integral to the market, which is why we have committed more than £270 million to the Faraday battery challenge, to ensure that the UK builds on its strengths and leads the world in the design, development and manufacture of electric batteries. In May, I announced additional funding for the UK Battery Industrialisation Centre in Coventry, a project in which we have so far invested more than £100 million and which will provide a stepping stone in our ambitions for a gigafactory in the UK. The Government and industry have committed around £1 billion over 10 years through the Advanced Propulsion Centre, to fund the research, development and commercialisation of the next generation of low-carbon technologies and keep the UK at the cutting edge of low-carbon automotive innovations.

We have reached the tipping point with the ULEV market and made a strong start on the Road to Zero, but we cannot be complacent. The closer that we can work together across Government, manufacturers, innovators and industry, the quicker we can make that transformation and allow future generations to enjoy the benefits of cleaner air, low carbon emissions and a thriving low emission automotive sector.

Mark Pawsey: Will the Minister comment on the fact that a new motorway service area is going to open with just two charge points? What can we do to accelerate the provision of charge points?

Andrew Stephenson: That is another shocking example. In the Road to Zero strategy, a copy of which I can lend to my hon. Friend, the Government announced that we would look into the best options for ensuring the adequate provision of electric-capacity connections at motorway service areas, and that work is under way. The key task over the next year is to sustain and strengthen our collaboration in the sector, as we stride towards our ambitious emissions targets for road vehicles and beyond.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls on the Government to bring forward the date by which the sale of new petrol and diesel cars and vans will be ended.

Assisted Dying

2.23 pm

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Ind): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the functioning of the existing law relating to assisted dying.

Six years ago this week, on a sunny July day like today, my father made a decision. At home in Devon, in the bed that he shared with my stepmother for more than 30 years, with his family around him, he took communion for the last time, said a few words of goodbye to each of us, and asked the district nurses to switch off the oxygen and make him comfortable. He could have clung on to life for several more days, but he was ready to go and, after talking it over with my stepmother, made his decision. A few hours later, he slipped away, with my brother by his side. This was the best of deaths: the saddest moments in our lives, filled with love and gratitude, and even joy.

A few months ago, Geoff Whaley made a similar decision. Cut from the same cloth as my dad, he was a gentleman of the old school, but Geoff had motor neurone disease and recognised that he was likely to suffer horribly in the final days and weeks of his life. He knew that his only chance of a good death was to arrange to go to Dignitas in Switzerland. Geoff was a determined and organised man, but there were some things that he physically could not do. He needed his wife Ann's help. When someone tipped off social services about their plan, the police turned up at the Whaleys' door and Ann was interviewed under caution. That caution remains on her record.

Thanks to the support of Ann and their daughter Sarah, Geoff died on his own terms, but several months earlier than he would have needed to had the same procedure been available here in the UK. Under Swiss law, none of the family was allowed to be present at his cremation. Yet Ann would describe herself as one of the lucky ones, because she and Geoff could afford the cost—the air fares, the hotels and the fees—of going to Dignitas. Every year, hundreds of other people in our country face the prospect of great suffering at the end of a terminal illness—suffering that cannot be alleviated by our wonderful palliative care nurses—and have no legal means of doing anything to stop it.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way during what is a heartfelt speech, but will he please answer the question of why he feels that the vast majority of disability organisations in this country remain opposed to assisted dying?

Nick Boles: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. It is incredibly important to understand all the concerns raised, perhaps especially those from such groups. What I think drives that very understandable concern is the fear that although a law might start off tightly constrained, there will be what people refer to as “the slippery slope”, and it might then be abused somehow: there might be situations in which people come under pressure to take their own lives when, in fact, they do not want to do so at all.

[Nick Boles]

All I would say to the hon. Lady—I am happy to have further conversations with her about this—is that in jurisdictions such as Oregon, where for 20 years now there has been a law of the kind that was proposed here, there is no evidence of that slippery slope argument leading to people being put under pressure. If ever there were to be such a change of the law here, it would of course be essential to have safeguards that would prevent that and ensure that disabled people knew they had the same right to life as any of us, for as long as they wanted.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab) *rose*—

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab) *rose*—

Nick Boles: I will give way to the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) first.

Lyn Brown: This is an incredibly difficult debate for many of us; most of us will have personal stuff that informs our judgments about it. My mum died suddenly, riddled with cancer. I know that had this law been passed at that time, she would have spent her last months consumed by guilt and anxiety about when she should press that button. She would have worried about the pressure on me and my sister, about the cost of her care, and that people would have thought she was consuming resources that she should not consume. Sometimes when we have this debate, we do not consider collectively the pressure we would put on people by giving them that choice.

Nick Boles: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. All I would say is that the law could operate only with independent assessment—both by doctors and by a High Court judge, under the proposal in the most recent Bill—that would be clear that the person could not show any signs of coming to a decision under pressure or because they felt they were a burden.

Interestingly, talking to the Whaleys about Dignitas, I heard how the Dignitas doctors explained that if at any point Geoff had said anything like, “I think it is time to go. My family wants me to go; they are ready, we are here,” they would have sent them home. On no account would they allow somebody to go through with it if there was any indication that they might have changed their mind or that they might be prioritising other people’s feelings.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Nick Boles: Let me make a little progress.

Kate Green *rose*—

Nick Boles: I will give way to the hon. Lady first.

Kate Green: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I thank him for the case that he is making. I support it, but I, too, recognise what a very difficult and sensitive issue this is.

In relation to disabled people and the concerns to which my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) rightly alluded, it is true that most disability organisations—perhaps all that I have spoken to—oppose the legislation that the hon. Gentleman and

I would like to see, but that is not true of every individual disabled person, and we should acknowledge that. Is it not the case therefore that what we need to ensure is that we build into any legislation excellent regulation, excellent audit and an equal commitment to investment in assisted living alongside the investment in assisted dying?

Nick Boles: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady. The truth is that this is not in any way an alternative to the best possible palliative care; it is a complement to the best possible palliative care. We want to ensure that all those who want to choose to live out their lives and die naturally—even through a horrific illness with horrific symptoms—are given every support to be able to make that decision. Unfortunately, we also know—and all the evidence suggests this—that there are some people for whom palliative care cannot help in those final moments, and it is of them that I am thinking.

What do we think of a law that criminalises otherwise law-abiding people, such as Ann Whaley, who are simply trying to act with love in accordance with their marriage vows and their conscience? What do we think of a law that forces people in the final months of a terminal illness to take desperate and even dangerous steps, which may cause even more suffering to themselves and to the people whom they love, in secret and without any safeguards or support? What do we think of a law that denies hundreds of innocent people dignity and control as their lives draw to a close and condemns them to extreme suffering instead? I will tell you what I think, Madam Deputy Speaker: it is a bad law and it should be changed.

However, the purpose of today’s debate is not to propose a new law on assisted dying, but to understand the effect of the current law on people suffering from terminal illnesses, on their families, on the doctors, nurses and carers looking after them, and on social workers and the police. It is only when we have fully understood all the different ways in which the current law impacts on the British people that we should consider returning to the question, last debated in 2015, of what kind of change in the law might be justified.

To that end, I have a request for my hon. Friend the Minister. We all understand and accept that laws such as these are matters of conscience and that it is for Parliament to initiate a change of the law, but Parliament’s ability to gather evidence is very limited. On behalf of those affected by such laws, and in honour of Geoff and Ann Whaley, I ask the Lord Chancellor and his boss, the Secretary of State for Justice, to initiate a formal call for evidence on the impact of our existing laws on assisted dying, so that Parliament can benefit from a comprehensive assessment of the facts when it next decides to debate and vote on a possible change in the law.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I came into the Chamber in 2015 fully intending to vote for a change in the law. However, as I listened to the debate, although I was completely persuaded by the points that he is now making, I was unpersuaded that that was the right law or that the right people had been persuaded that it was the right law. What has changed between then and now that he thinks would bring the House to a different conclusion?

Nick Boles: I do not think that I have ever had a more intelligent set of interventions, so I thank the hon. Gentleman for another one. There has been change, but I do not want to pretend that the change has gone far enough, which is why we are not proposing, at this point, to bring forward a new set of legal measures.

Perhaps the most significant change is in the opinion of the medical profession. We have seen a number of royal colleges move from having a formal position of opposing assisted dying to having a position of being neutral about it, which reflects the fact that they will always have some members who are very much opposed to it, but they now have an increasing number of physicians who are in favour of it.

We have seen not so much a change as a consolidation of public opinion on this issue. In the latest opinion poll, which, frankly, is not very different from any of the opinion polls over the past couple of years, more than 80% of the British public support an assisted dying law for people in the final six months of a terminal illness, and well over 50% of people who declare that they have an active faith take that view. So although Church leaders, apart from the very honourable exception of the former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey, are opposed, their flocks are actually finding that they, too, believe that a change in the law is justified.

I also agree with the hon. Gentleman that, before any further proposals come forward, we should study closely the experience in the state of Victoria in Australia, for example. As he will be aware, New Zealand recently passed on Second Reading an assisted dying law, and there is the much longer standing experience of Oregon as well as Canada more recently. We should study all those and look at the precise legal and medical safeguards used to try to devise something that avoids many of the risks that have been raised by other hon. Members.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con) *rose*—

Nick Boles: I will give way very briefly, but then I must conclude.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin). In the Netherlands, the number of physician-assisted deaths is 3.5%, which, in this country, would translate into 21,000 deaths a year. There are about 5,000 suicides a year in this country, of which about 400 are estimated to be people dying at their own hand because they have a terminal illness that they do not want to live with. How can one explain to anyone else the difference between that 300 or 400 and 21,000, which is four times the number of suicides that we have at the moment?

Nick Boles: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point, because it allows me to point out that the Netherlands law is a completely different law, and I would vote against it if anyone proposed it in the House of Commons. It is a law to enable people to commit suicide more or less whenever they want. That may work for the Dutch—I have nothing but respect for the Dutch people—but I could not vote for it, and I do not believe that it would get more than 100 votes in this House.

What we are proposing is something that has existed in the state of Oregon in the United States for 20 years, and it has never crept anywhere near being the kind of law that the hon. Gentleman is talking about. Yes, of course, there will be much more lax and liberal laws of assisted suicide in other jurisdictions. That is of no relevance at all to the question of whether, in the final six months of a terminal illness, a narrow assisted dying law, with legal and medical safeguards, can operate safely in the United Kingdom, as it does in Canada and in the state of Oregon. I am entirely confident that it can.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Nick Boles: I must wind up, because Madam Deputy Speaker has pointed out that there are many, many Members who wish to speak.

I am keen to hear from as many Members as possible during this debate. I will listen to all contributions with sincere respect, because this is a very difficult issue and one on which I myself have changed my mind since 2015. Before I sit down, I would just like to say a word on the role of religious faith in the debate about assisted dying.

I admire people who are blessed with religious belief. My own father was, and I envied him. Faith groups play a very positive role in our society and I salute them for it, but this country is a democracy, not a theocracy. When we make our laws, we must focus on men and women, not on God. Parliament was right to legislate to allow abortion for women in the early months of a pregnancy, despite the opposition of Church leaders. Parliament was right to legislate to extend the institution of marriage to gay people although most organised religions still consider homosexuality a sin. When Parliament next debates the reform of our laws on assisted dying, I hope that it is not religious doctrine, but humanity—our humanity as Members of Parliament and the humanity of all those suffering from terminal illnesses—that wins the day.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): As colleagues can see, many Members wish to contribute to the debate. If everybody is to have the chance to speak, speeches will need to be kept to about six minutes.

2.40 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I will be very brief. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) for the eloquent way in which he has introduced this very important debate. I just want to refer to him one of my constituents, Mr Noel Conway, who has campaigned on this issue for many years, both through the courts and the media. I had the privilege of visiting him and his wife at their beautiful Shropshire home, where I spent the afternoon finding out about his daily life and how his wife is caring for him. As I am sure hon. Members will realise, it was an extraordinarily emotional afternoon, especially when I found out about some of the very difficult conditions my constituent is living under and the constant care that he needs.

[Daniel Kawczynski]

I spoke to Mr Conway about the possibility of him travelling to Switzerland, and his answer will stay with me forever; he said, “No, I am an Englishman and I want to die in England.” I think that is extremely important, because although some constituents have the wherewithal, financial means and opportunities to travel to Switzerland to take things into their own hands, that is not always the case for all our constituents bearing in mind financial restrictions, but also the fact that some people do not want to leave our country to be able to die. This is their home; this where their families live; and this is where they want to die.

I have always been a Roman Catholic—having been born in Poland, I come from a very strict Roman Catholic family—and my Christian belief is very important to me, but I have disagreed with my own Church on numerous issues. As the right hon. Gentleman alluded to, in our views, the Church is not always right. Having now been in a same-sex partnership very happily for the past eight years, I, too, agree that although we can respect the church and our Christian beliefs, perhaps the Church does not always get everything right when it comes to how human beings behave, interact and ultimately decide to die.

I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate to the Chamber. I have not decided how I will vote in future debates and my constituent Mr Conway knows that I have not yet decided, but I really appreciate that the hon. Gentleman has afforded us this opportunity to continue debating this matter until a consensus can be achieved.

2.43 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) for securing this debate, and for the thoughtful and powerful way in which he opened it. Like him, I will share a personal experience, although mine is not as positive.

It is, by a coincidence, the eighth anniversary to the day of my receiving a phone call here in Westminster that my father had been found dead in his garage. The previous night, he had tidied up his belongings, left small piles of money to settle the bills with the newsagent and others, and written final notes. He had then walked to the garage, connected a hosepipe from his car exhaust into the car, taken an overdose and switched on the engine. As hon. Members can see, I do not find this easy to talk about, even after eight years, but I have done so before and I will do so today, not least because I know that he would have wanted me to, as somebody who had always believed in a change in the law on assisted dying.

My father's experience shows how the existing law does not simply fail people, but leads to premature deaths. Now, I know that some of those opposing a change argue—I respect my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) for doing so—that it could lead to people taking their lives sooner than they would otherwise face their end. But my experience, and the experience of many others—I think that some of the statistics mentioned by the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) are understated—is that the existing law in itself encourages people to take their life sooner than they would otherwise do.

My father was 87. At that age, he had inevitably watched many of his friends go, often miserably. He talked in particular of one friend who had become confined to bed, doubly incontinent, and—having become both deaf and blind—unable to communicate with anybody. My father saw no point in that kind of life, and had always said that he would rather end things than face a degrading death. He was somebody who had made the most of his life: he had a tough east end upbringing in poverty, became an RAF pilot in the war and built a successful business career. He had his share of health problems, but faced them all positively. He was not afraid of pain, but he could not face the indignity of a lingering death, and I am sure that he made up his mind to take his life soon after receiving a terminal diagnosis of inoperable lung cancer. But he still died prematurely, and I am sure that what drove him to end his life at that point was the fear that if he did not act when he could and was still able to do so, he would lose the opportunity to act at all. He could not talk to me or his partner about it, because he would have made us complicit. The current law forced my father into a lonely decision and a lonely death.

Some people will say that we simply need to improve end-of-life care, and it is hugely important that we do. My father supported our local hospice and I raise funds for it. It does a great job, but no hospice can enable everybody to die with the dignity that they would want. Indeed, for my father, it was soon after his appointment with a palliative care nurse where together they talked about his last months that he took the decision to take his life. If the law had made it possible, he could have shared his plans with us, and knowing that he could, with support, go at the time of his choosing would have enabled him to stay longer. If the law had made it possible, he would have been able to say goodbye and go with his family around him, not in a carbon monoxide-filled garage. He, and many others like him, deserve better. We simply need to change the law.

I appreciate that there are those here whose personal beliefs—whose faith—makes my father's choice unacceptable. I respect those beliefs. Live your life by them, but do not impose them on others. Let people have the choice at the end of their lives. Allow them dignity in dying as we would want them to have it in life.

2.49 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I have been engaged in this issue since the very early days when I arrived in this Parliament in 1997, guided, along with many other right hon. and hon. Members, by the experience within my own wider family.

By 2040, nearly one in seven people is projected to be aged over 75, so we will be engaged in supporting an ageing population who will lead fuller lives, working longer, by adapting the workplace and ensuring that individuals can reskill throughout their life. But people will be living with chronic conditions, and multiple morbidities and cognitive impairments will become more common within our population. I have no doubt that our innovative and caring society will solve, or certainly ameliorate, these conditions, but the hard truth is that more of us will have to grapple with surviving with the pain and indignity of crippling progressive infirmity in later life.

If we do not change the law, even more people than the current one every eight days may travel to Switzerland for an assisted death—and, of course, there are all those

people who do not have the means to travel and all those travelling to Switzerland early so that they can exercise the autonomy available to them there. I do appreciate the views not only of right hon. and hon. Members but of the public who express concerns over assisted dying. It is of course a controversial subject. However, the injustice and the tyranny of having no escape from pain and indignity that our law continues to impose on a growing number of our fellow citizens will not go away until we address it. In Oregon, since 1997, a total of 1,127 patients have died from ingesting these medications. Not only does the yearly figure barely rise above the 0.003% mark, but only 64% of those who have received prescriptions for the medications since 1997 have actually taken them.

When we discuss this emotional topic, the most grotesque characteristics of greedy, overbearing relatives are conjured up in some hypothetical dark fantasy, but these arguments about a slippery slope or the vulnerability of people simply ignore the fact that this applies only to terminally ill people. When the Assisted Dying Bill came to this House in 2015, its terms would require two doctors to sign off on the fact that the person would be dead within six months and the process to be overseen by a High Court judge. How many more measures would opponents of this principle want to satisfy them? The difficult truth is that for many, it is none. This is about the imposition of a faith-based view of the sanctity of life overriding any sensible application of personal autonomy for people in dreadful and terminal strife.

Lyn Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Crispin Blunt: No, I will not. I might want to pick up on the example the hon. Lady gave later in my remarks.

That personal autonomy on any individual application of universal human rights includes the freedom to control and direct one's own life and, in this case, death. Yet again, despite a poll in March of more than 5,000 people showing that 84% of Britons wanted a change in the law on assisted dying, they have to contend with the moral certainties of those who are not suffering extreme pain and who are taking these decisions on their behalf—us. We have a responsibility to discuss this issue in an honest, compassionate and evidence-based manner, and we have a swathe of evidence available to us.

The whole Oregon experience entirely supports that this is a practical, sensible, humane and decent measure. Over two decades later, the opinion of the people has not changed one iota. This Parliament, in not facing up to its responsibilities, is party to increasing tyranny, pain and despair.

Ultimately, this is about potential control. Just as people exercise control over how they live, they should be able to exercise control over how they die. In reality, the vast majority of people will never take this choice, even when faced with it. With strong safeguards, Oregon, Washington state, Montana and Vermont have had no documented reported cases of abuse. Why, when the evidence is clear, do we deny everyone the comfort of some personal control over the end of their life?

To return to the point made by the hon. Lady, I wonder what her mother's view was, because under the law, she could not exercise her autonomy. I am utterly certain that the hon. Lady would have wanted, with all the generosity in the world, to ensure that her mother

had the full support available to her. Well, that just might not have been the view of her mother, in the pain and difficulty that she was facing. Why was she not allowed the opportunity to make that decision?

Lyn Brown: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; she would have argued that she should have had the right to take her own life, but let me put one statistic to him. He mentioned Washington state—51% of the people who took the tablets there said that their reason for doing so was that they were a burden to the people they loved. That is the exact reason that my mother would have done the same. We must weigh the evidence properly.

Crispin Blunt: The evidence is there to be weighed by two doctors and a High Court judge, and the hon. Lady's mother and other people in those circumstances would have had the right to exercise their autonomy. It is that autonomy and that control that we are choosing to suppress. Sadly, for now, it remains that we have a cruel, outdated law that forces people to die earlier by traveling to Switzerland while they are fit enough to travel, or to suffer pain, indignity and degradation that we would never impose on a suffering animal.

2.57 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I regularly visit Ty Olwen, a fantastic hospice in my constituency, which is staffed by the most wonderful clinicians and volunteers. Ty Olwen is a beautiful, peaceful haven, providing dignified, loving and intensive palliative care for patients, as well as comfort for their loved ones. I am full of admiration for the work they do and the care they give, but sometimes that may not be the choice of the person who has been diagnosed with a terminal illness. Imagine for just one minute being given that diagnosis. Imagine, in time, knowing each day that you will never feel this good again and that eventually all your future holds is more discomfort, more fear and possibly a slow and painful death.

While I wholeheartedly believe that life is sacred—I have a faith, and it is my faith that gives me strength—I am a huge advocate of quality of life over quantity and for an individual's right to make their own choices. I cannot say 100% which path I would choose if I was given that diagnosis, but I know for a fact that I would want to be able to make that choice, and I would want the same for loved ones.

I appreciate that assisted dying is an emotive and contentious issue that splits opinion in this House and across society, but when someone makes the decision to end their life with assistance while they are still physically able to do so and of sound mind, they will do so after much research, thoroughly discussing it with their family and considering the consequences.

As it stands, a UK citizen travels to Switzerland to end their life every eight days. I believe that if the law allowed assisted dying in this country, enabling people to choose to die surrounded by their loved ones in a familiar environment, that would bring comfort and solace to many people.

Under the Suicide Act 1961, while suicide itself is not a criminal offence, the act of encouraging or assisting someone else's suicide is, leaving doctors and families facing prosecutions and up to 14 years in prison. There are many people who would, and do, choose to continue

[Carolyn Harris]

with their suffering, sometimes dying a painful and undignified death, rather than risk those consequences for their families.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and I agree with much of it. Does she agree that there need to be various safeguards and that the law is outdated, and this may be a subject for the Law Commission to look into?

Carolyn Harris: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, and we have to make sure that the right safeguards are in place.

A few years ago, I met a woman who had recently travelled to Switzerland with her terminally ill husband to end his life. She supported his decision to end his suffering on his own terms, and she watched the man she loved die a peaceful, respectable and comfortable death. She then returned home alone, where she was questioned by the police for facilitating his final journey. I watched this woman struggling to cope with the fear of prosecution on top of the grief that was already eating away at her.

I understand the concerns surrounding assisted dying, and the need to ensure that the decision is voluntary and one that has been expressed repeatedly over a period of time. As in most things, I still believe people should be given a choice. Palliative care is wonderful and it is the right choice for some, but for others assisted dying is their preference. The point is that everybody should have the right to control their own life, and ultimately their own death.

3.1 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). I thank the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) for bringing forward this debate, because I am on something of a journey in relation to my approach to this issue. That approach has largely been shaped by speaking to the family of a constituent who, in July 2017, went to Dignitas in Switzerland, where she ended her life. Her mother and sister came to see me, and their experience echoes that of the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). I pay tribute to him for his bravery in outlining his experience with his father.

Anna, my constituent's sister, said:

"To get to Dignitas in Switzerland Jemima had to be able to single-handedly plan, pay for and travel across the UK until she was outside its legal jurisdiction, all without any family support. In accompanying Jemima to Dignitas, I knew that my family and I were going to be subjected to a police investigation on our return from Switzerland. At the worst possible time, when we were grieving the loss of our loved one.

Jemima interpreted the UK laws as best she could so that she didn't implicate us in her death but she was still terrified that we would be prosecuted on our return. Jemima was also really concerned that her degenerative diseases would deteriorate to the point where she would not be able to either plan the journey or to physically get to Switzerland under her own steam.

So Jemima made the decision to have an assisted suicide years before she needed to. The UK Government literally stole years of my sister's life. I know if she had been able to exercise her 'right to die' in the UK, she would have chosen to stay with us for many more years to come."

I think those are very powerful words.

Those who wish to end their lives now must leave the UK alone, despite their ill health, or leave with relatives who will face suspicion and investigation when they return home. This imposes a legal complexity that requires ordinary people, at a time of great stress, to understand and interpret complex areas of law and how it is enforced by the police, often without professional legal advice, because of the terms of the Suicide Act, as outlined by the hon. Member for Swansea East. I would like to focus on that for a moment. In the case of this constituent, I had to write to Cheshire police to ask what its approach was and how it enforced the law. The lack of clarity from police forces is deeply troubling, and although I was pleased that it said it would enhance constable training and update its website, I am deeply concerned that that guidance is still not online. That means there is a postcode lottery in this country regarding how a local police force will enforce the law, which makes an already complex legal picture even more difficult to navigate. Whether or not we change the law, the police must respond to these cases far more sensitively and be more transparent about how they handle them.

My constituent and her family were put through months of hell, waiting for an investigation to conclude. To face such scrutiny after a heart-rending loss is difficult, but for the police to then make a family spend month after month reliving their loss does not serve the interests of the family, the public or justice. Despite all that, my constituent had the resources to go to Switzerland and plan her own death.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): My hon. Friend says that her constituent had the resources to go to Switzerland and end her life. Does she know how much it costs to go to Dignitas? The whole package, plus recovery of the body, must be an eye-watering amount.

Antoinette Sandbach: Dignity in Dying estimates the average cost of a trip to Dignitas to be around £10,000, which is a substantial amount. Only one third of UK families have that much in savings, so under our current system, with its manifest cruelties, that option is inaccessible to two thirds of the country on financial grounds alone.

This week Jemima's mother told me:

"I have become increasingly sure that under certain circumstances and with the right safeguards, a person should have the right to choose to end their life in this country. I know Jemima would have been with us for longer if she had been able to take that choice at home."

Alongside her heartfelt plea for reform, and those of others, there must be two key criteria for any future proposals. First, assisted dying must be made available under certain circumstances, and there must be appropriate safeguards for patients, families, medical professionals and those who need to enforce the law. It is a difficult area, but I hope that Jemima's story will help build a consensus that will allow us to take this issue forward, and that we will not continue to block future changes to the law.

3.8 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), my right hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and others for giving us the opportunity to debate this subject. Members have spoken movingly and from experience about their views.

I am someone whose views have radically changed. Until recently I was a vehement opponent of assisted dying, but I have changed my views and think I should explain why. That change is partly based on an understanding of why I was previously opposed to it, which was due to my own personal experiences. Two of those experiences were relevant, and I think they will resonate with many Members of the House.

One experience concerned my elderly mother who descended, as many do, into confusion and dementia, compounded by mental illness and depression. One week she would say, "Please, please end my life. I am a burden. I want to go", but a few weeks later she would be enjoying the simple pleasures of life. I could see all too clearly that under a permissive system of assisted dying, people like my late mother would be extremely vulnerable.

My conviction at that time that assisted dying was the wrong route was compounded by my experience with my late wife, who contracted breast cancer and had a very long illness. She eventually died at home with good palliative care, surrounded by a loving family. She was vehemently opposed to assisted dying and wanted to live her life to the full. I guess that I took the view that that was her choice but should also be everybody's choice.

I came to realise, however, that there are very different situations we need to understand. One thing on my conscience is that in my 20 years as an MP, two constituents came to see me to request help and political support for a campaign in the High Court to be allowed to die through assisted dying and, although I expressed sympathy, as one would expect, I declined to support their campaign. I was very wrong to do so. Both suffered from motor neurone disease, and I think many of us know of such cases. One has surfaced today: a man called Richard Selley in Perth, in Scotland, who is fighting for the right to assisted dying. I think we all know the nature of this condition. Although some people live with it, Professor Hawking being a famous example, in most cases it involves the physical degeneration of all bodily functions combined with absolute clarity of mind and very great suffering. It seems to me that we should consider the position of those living with it and similar conditions.

The argument that is deployed against doing so is that hard cases make bad law. That was quite well summarised by Lord Sumption, who gave the Reith lectures a few years ago, when he said assisted dying should be criminalised but that the criminal law should be broken. That is a somewhat strange way of putting it, but essentially what I think he was saying was that we should keep the law but turn a blind eye to exceptions and treat them compassionately.

I have thought about that argument, but it seems to me that the evidence is very strongly against it for a variety of reasons. However sensitive the Director of Public Prosecutions or the police might be—I am sure they are; the 2015 guidance is very humane—the sheer process of going through a criminal investigation and a caution is deeply traumatic, and probably the most difficult period of any person's life. It is probably also difficult for the police who have to implement it.

We can all see from the evidence that the law simply is not working: from the fact that 300 people over the past decade have been through the pain—and, indeed, the expense—of the Dignitas solution, and the fact that

about 300 people a year are killing themselves, often without medical support and in very painful circumstances. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) gave a very moving example, which I think showed the extent to which the law as it currently stands does not work.

When we put that together with the change in public opinion and the change in the views of the various medical bodies that would have to administer this and would be faced with the awesome responsibility of authorising assisted dying, I think the evidence is now very strongly in favour of a change to the law. I hope that when the opportunity arises, we will progress beyond the theoretical discussion to the practicalities of how we introduce humane legislation with proper safeguards.

3.14 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) on initiating yet a further discussion on this subject. We have heard some passionate contributions, and very moving ones, including that by the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), who delivered his speech with great dignity; I congratulate him on that.

We discuss a wide range of matters in this House, from rather mundane ones, such as those which we were discussing before this debate, to those that affect life and death. Nothing, of course, can be more important than issues that affect life and death.

I am not a lawyer; nor do I claim any particular insight. Indeed, I see through a glass darkly. I have an uneasy feeling, which I know is shared by some hon. Members, that we as a society are moving towards a situation in which assisted dying is legitimised, and I recognise that many would support that, as we have heard this afternoon. For myself, I believe life to be sacred and God-given, and I readily acknowledge that that is a view that is not universally accepted. However, I am sure we can all agree that life is uniquely precious, and that we should do all we can to preserve it, and I do not in any way question the motives of those, be they Members of this House or members of the public at large, who take a different view. Many will have reached those conclusions having witnessed the slow, painful death of a loved one.

I believe that any move to lay out a statutory framework is a further step, however small, towards an acceptance that assisted dying is in some way given the seal of approval. Some things are best left in the grey area.

We are today discussing the functioning of the current law, and it is perhaps an argument to say that it is not as clear as some desire, but surely the question is whether we can give clarity to such a complex matter—can we, as the Legislature, frame an Act of Parliament to cover all the complexities—or is it better, in cases that are presented to the prosecuting authorities or the courts, to leave it to them to consider the unique circumstances that each case presents?

Both my parents died of cancer and suffered in their final months. I well remember the telephone call from a specialist who, having received the results of the tests on my father, said, "We must hope that God is merciful and does not allow him to suffer for too long". Although he did suffer, it was not for too long. In fact, he lived for

[*Martin Vickers*]

a further six months after I received that fateful call. In his final weeks, which he spent in St Andrew's hospice in Grimsby, I saw what comfort could be offered through palliative care. No longer did he suffer the periods of pain that he had had in earlier weeks—and that happened as long ago as 1988. Through my visits to St Andrew's since, and to Lindsey Lodge hospice near Scunthorpe, both of which serve my constituency, I have seen the advances that have been made in the years since. Sadly, my mother died in hospital on the day that she was to be transferred to St Andrew's.

In the case of both my parents, it is probably true that their passing was hastened by drugs, such as morphine, and no doubt others would argue that it would have been better had they been given the opportunity to shorten their lives by a few weeks or months, but I firmly believe it is better that the situation is left as it is. If one is old, frail, weak and seriously ill, one needs help, support and compassion—not the added worry and the nagging doubt over whether everything possible is being done to preserve one's life.

Crispin Blunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend. He is making an extremely good argument so far, except that it does not address the wider benefit that comes from a change in the law here, which is about the knowledge that you have that control available to you as you enter a period when you might be contemplating these very difficult decisions. That is the principal benefit that would come from a change in the law. By leaving a grey area in the law, we deny nearly all of us the benefit of knowing that we have that control at the end of our life.

Martin Vickers: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and acknowledge that that is a deeply held view for him and many others, but I am afraid it is not one that I share.

Lyn Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way because, counter to that, there is the issue of vulnerability, which we have not really come to in this debate. On Friday an elderly couple came to me, terrified for their daughter, who was in a very expensive care facility. Their grandsons, who they love dearly, wanted to take that woman out of that expensive care facility because it was costing too much of their inheritance. We cannot have this debate in a vacuum; we need to understand people's vulnerabilities—the vulnerabilities of my constituents' daughter, the vulnerabilities of my mum, and the vulnerabilities of the constituent of whom the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) spoke, who ended her life. We must understand that this issue is a reality, and not just dodge the subject.

Martin Vickers: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. As I mentioned earlier, every situation is different and I think the complexity of framing a law that covers everything is beyond us, to be honest.

Susan Elan Jones: I am conscious that the late Lord Walton of Detchant spoke passionately on this subject. He was a great neuroscientist, but he was also president of the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign, one of the great disability organisations. He spoke and wrote at length on the issue of vulnerability: it is a massively difficult ethical issue, but it has to be considered.

Martin Vickers: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention and I share those views.

Having spoken of the work of the hospice movement, I will take the opportunity to pay tribute to all those who work in, volunteer for and generously support the hospice movement, with a special mention for St Andrew's in Grimsby, which is marking its 40th anniversary this year.

We all have to cope with the loss of loved ones, and such experiences raise—in the mind of any right-thinking person—the question of how to minimise suffering. If someone has previously indicated their wish to hasten their death, I acknowledge that it is extremely difficult, and a major moral dilemma, to say to them, "Sorry, that's not possible." However, I believe that any move to legalise assisted dying would be yet another step that lessened the value that we as a society place on human life.

The relationship between doctor and patient is crucial, and it could be compromised if the patient was anything other than 100% certain that the doctor was striving to maintain life. When we are old, weak and seriously ill, we need compassion and support, not the nagging doubt—

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I do not think this debate is about the sanctity of life, because the people who did not support the Bill last time believe it is legitimate to end a life early; the question is how to legalise it. It is not a moral question. On the point about the medical profession, plenty of evidence shows that people are acting in the grey area that my hon. Friend describes, leaving them with the questions he mentioned. That is not the issue either. The question is whether we can safely change the law in a way that does not create new or worse dangers.

Martin Vickers: I recognise what my hon. Friend says, but I do not think it is possible to change the law and cover all the varying circumstances. I regret the fact that many in the medical profession are moving towards support for assisted dying. The views of the public vary considerably at various times, and can be influenced by headlines, but I hoped that the medical profession would take a different view. Mention has been made of motor neurone disease, and I recognise the unique difficulties of that condition because I had an aunt who died from the disease.

I will finish shortly as I appreciate that I have taken interventions. I have a final question. Is the abortion law working as originally intended? I would argue that that is not case. A change in this law would open the door to a very different thing. Transparency is something we seek in many areas, such as financial dealings, but in this area I suggest that the grey area should remain.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am anxious to ensure that everyone is able to contribute, and I urge colleagues to be considerate to each other. I am now going to apply the six-minute limit.

3.24 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I have made just a few notes for my speech, because this is a very important debate.

I picked up a couple of emails earlier from constituents. Some wished me to speak in favour of a change in the law, while others wished me to oppose it. I wanted to

stand up today and explain why I would vote in favour of assisted dying if legislation were to be introduced in the House, because I grew up as a Catholic, I was educated in a good Catholic school, and I feel very strongly that when something becomes a religious issue we must be very careful about how we use our language, particularly when the issue involves life and death.

The debate is very pertinent to me, because I have a kind of counter-argument. My father died on 22 December 2011, and this choice was taken away from him. It was not like the situation described by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), whose father, having known that he was dying, sadly and tragically took his own life.

I feel very strongly about people being in hospital and being told that they will be fine and they are keeping going, given that in this case the decision was not a decision made by the patient and the doctor. That doctor took away our family's choice, and the opportunity—not the choice, but the opportunity—to discuss with my father how he would end his life. He would not have been in favour of assisted dying—I can tell you that with my hand on my heart—but the information was kept from him, and from the family, that his medication was to be withdrawn, and he was to die a very painful and horrible death in a hospital bed just before Christmas because it was at the convenience of the hospital.

This is a mega decision, and one that each individual has the right to make, because we should have that choice; we should be able to choose how we end our lives. The choice was taken away from my father and from the family, and I will never forgive the clinician for that.

I believe that charities should play a greater part in this discussion, because talking about dying and death is a huge taboo in our society. The need to improve knowledge and understanding of death is key to the debate. Amazing work is done by people like Kathryn Mannix, a palliative care consultant in Wales. It is very important for these options to be available to us, and for us to be able to have the necessary conversations. There are many flippant conversations with my friends and family—"If anything is going to happen to me, you know what to do; I will have my savings, and I will have my paracetamol"—but we should not be having such conversations. It is our duty as Members of Parliament to ensure that there is legislation that enables people to decide how they want to end their lives.

I pay tribute to the people who are in the Public Gallery today, because they include many families who have either been in this situation or are in this situation currently. We need to remember that their journey is real, and we need to know that we must have this discussion. I will not use any religion, or my Catholic upbringing, as a reason for the discussion not to happen, or for a change in the law not to come about.

We have talked about the law in New Zealand, and, indeed, across the world. Let me also pay tribute to a good friend of mine, Louisa Wall, a Member of Parliament from Auckland in New Zealand. She too is in the Gallery today, and she has a great interest in the debate.

I hope that we will see that legislation, and I just wanted to explain to my constituents, and to everyone, how I would intend to vote.

3.29 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Let us look at some of the reasons given by those advocating a change in this law. They say the current law is not working and point to cases such as that of Ann Whaley—a case surely deserving of our compassion, but one that contradicts their arguments for change. It shows that our current law is working.

No prosecution was proceeded with in Ann's case. I understand how unpleasant it must have been for her to be interviewed under caution, but the CPS approaches such cases on the basis that if someone is in some way involved with the suicide of another person, yet has compassionate rather than self-interested motives, it is highly unlikely that they will be taken to court. Indeed, there have been only three successful such prosecutions in England and Wales in the last 10 years, and during that period just 148 cases were referred to the CPS.

The small number of cases and rarity of prosecutions indicate that our law is an effective deterrent to those with malicious or self-interested motives and protects against the very real danger of the abuse of the disabled, sick, frail or elderly and the danger that they could feel pressured into ending their own lives.

Why change this? Proponents of change argue, as we have heard from the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), for a very focused, very limited, legal change on assisted dying, but it would not stop there.

Nick Boles: Is it not the case that it has stopped there in Oregon for 20 years?

Fiona Bruce: In fact, that is not the case: in Oregon now there are clear public pressures for a widening of the law there.

Nick Boles: But the law has not changed in Oregon; it has remained exactly the same for 20 years.

Fiona Bruce: Let me turn then to the case of Canada, whose law in this area was also cited by the hon. Gentleman as an example we should follow. Just a few days ago, a clinical director from Canada came to this place and made a presentation. I was privileged enough to chair the meeting; it was called "‘Assisted dying’ in Canada? A cautionary tale." To clarify, at about the same time as this House rejected assisted suicide here, in Canada there was a court case that decriminalised assisted suicide on the basis that it should be up to capable adults who clearly consent to the termination of life and are suffering intolerably from a grievous and irredeemable medical condition.

What the clinical director told us was startling. She told us of grave problems now being encountered in that country in connection with the practice of assisted suicide. She told us that in fact medical assistance in dying, or MAID as it is called there, involves in 99% of cases euthanasia, not assisted suicide. She told us of funding allocated to palliative care previously now being diverted for these purposes; of assessments being done on a very rudimentary basis, including even by telephone; of safeguards such as the 10-day reflection period being regularly shortened; and of MAID being used for non-terminal illnesses, even in a case of arthritis. There are now even proposals for it to be extended to so-called mature minors.

[Fiona Bruce]

The suggested need for two clinicians to give consent is apparently being effectively flouted, too: all anyone has to do if they cannot find one of the clinicians from the first two approached to give consent is approach another and another until one who will give consent is obtained. Conscientious objection by practitioners is not statutorily provided for, so practitioners are feeling increasingly obligated to undertake this. In Canada the safeguards simply are not working, and I was interested to hear Baroness Meacher, the chair of Dignity in Dying, stand up at the end of that meeting and say, “We don’t want that in this country.”

Those advocating change argue that legal opinion has changed, but it has not. In the most recent court case—that of Noel Conway, who has been mentioned here today—arguments for a change in our current law were rejected not just by three judges of the divisional court, but by three judges of the Court of Appeal, and three judges of the Supreme Court, our highest court, then declined permission for a further appeal.

Advocates of change have wrongly and selectively argued that in a Reith lecture this year the former Justice of the Supreme Court, Lord Sumption, called for a change in this law. He did not. In fact, if his speech is read in context and comprehensively, it is clear that he said the very opposite. He did no more than state a fundamental principle of the criminal law—namely, that it is there to protect society by prohibiting acts regarded as unacceptable, and that one such act is encouraging or assisting suicide. He said that

“we need to have a law against it in order to prevent abuse”.

Yes, he referred to what he called the “untidy compromise”, which recognises that, as with other criminal laws, there can be exceptional circumstances where a person breaks the law for altruistic reasons, and that in such cases prosecution may not be warranted, but there is a world of difference between not prosecuting in such situations and licensing acts in advance.

Next, those arguing for change say that medical opinion is shifting. On what basis? A recent Royal College of Physicians poll of its members is mired in controversy. The RCP was, before the poll, opposed to any change in the law. However, this poll unprecedentedly required a super-majority of 60% of those voting to maintain the status quo. How strange! Bizarrely, the RCP’s council is now arguing that the result of this poll justifies a change in the college’s stance, despite the result of the poll showing that the highest number of those members voting—43.4%—opposed any change in the law and that the lowest number—25%—thought that the RCP should be neutral. Yet, strangely, the RCP has chosen to adopt a neutral stance. It is no wonder that the poll has been the subject of a referral to the Charity Commission for investigation. And for what? As Baroness Finlay said in another place, “neutrality adds nothing”. Let us also note that, within that vote, more than 80% of palliative care physicians wanted the RCP to remain opposed to change.

The fact that the British Medical Association and the Royal College of General Practitioners are set to consult their members is neither a surprise nor an indication of a change in their position. Professional membership consultations can be expected every few years. Indeed, the RCGP said five years ago that it would do this

about now. It is to be hoped that both the BMA and the RCGP will reaffirm their opposition to any change in the law.

Finally, the proponents for change argue that public opinion is shifting, but it all depends on the question people are asked. That is the problem with the 80% figure that the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford cited. The more deeply we probe this issue and the more aware people are of the implications of change, the more concerned people become. I can quote from another poll from February this year indicating that more than half the public say that

“some people would feel pressurised into accepting help to take their own life so as not to be a burden on others”

if assisted suicide were legal. Only 25% disagreed with that.

3.37 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): It was a pleasure to join the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) in applying for this debate. I want to use my time to tell the stories of two constituents. The first is Vonnie Daykin, who has come to Parliament today to hear the debate. She has talked about how she witnessed her uncle and her father die of Parkinson’s and her mother die of motor neurone disease. She says that her mother went through living hell, but ultimately had no choice and was forced to suffer “until the bitter end”.

I also want to spend a little time quoting my constituent, Zoe Marley. Her words deserve to be heard in Parliament, so if I may, I will quote from an email that she sent me. She says:

“In January 2018 my mum Judith Marley was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer...She had nursed her own mother with cancer and had seen numerous ‘bad’ deaths. From the outset, she announced that she would not let the cancer do its worst, but would formulate a plan to escape the terror. No matter how marvellous the palliative care, she didn’t want it.”

That is her right, incidentally.

“She was a very private person; her death should have been a private affair instead of the circus that it became. On a warm July afternoon in 2018, she took a framed picture of her mum, a bottle of Drambuie and approximately 70 sleeping pills into the garden and in this most cherished place, she proceeded to attempt to take her life.”

After some considerable time, her daughter found her there; she had not died and then started to come round. Zoe was then placed into an impossibly invidious position, not knowing whether to call an ambulance. Her mother had already given her lasting power of attorney and did not want resuscitation—her legal right. Ultimately, however, because of the impossible situation that her daughter was in, she had to call an ambulance. Zoe says:

“Her wishes to stay at home and not be admitted to hospital were my priority as her LPA. But was I technically assisting her suicide? My lack of action could be considered supporting a suicide. I was terrified of the consequences of my inactivity. We waited but no change, the day was cooling down and I wanted her to be comfortable.”

In the end, an ambulance was called, and a doctor also attended.

Zoe writes:

“The doctor was unsympathetic. He said he had spoken to an on-call psychiatrist and that he was within his rights to call the police so they could take her to hospital. He was threatening and arrogant, telling me if Mum died there would be a police investigation and she would have a full autopsy. It all made me sick to my stomach. All this time my beautiful Mum laid outside while my

daughter held her hand. I had somehow found myself embroiled with a medical team that had no understanding of how to interpret the law. The doctor called the police and three officers arrived. I have never had the police come to my door. It was demeaning and frightening. Once again I showed them my Mum's paperwork and begged them to bring her inside. They seemed unsure of what to do, the expression 'grey area' was used a lot."

To answer the point of the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), grey areas cause enormous distress, as in this case. Zoe continues:

"After much confusion they insisted they take Mum to hospital. I was now indignant and focused on what Mum wanted. I made it very clear I would obstruct them. I felt everyone was 'trying to cover their backs' which meant disregarding my Mum's wishes.

Finally sanity prevailed, they contacted the A&E manager at our local hospital who realised even if they brought her in, the LPA would stop them from treating her. So finally at 3 am they brought Mum inside."

Moving on a month, Zoe writes that the

"symptoms from the brain metastasis made their ugly appearance... The pain in her head was unbearable and the constant vomiting made keeping pain medication down almost impossible..."

On Friday the 17th of August, Mum had had enough. She knew only torture lay ahead! That evening she took all the morphine and sleeping pills available to her and by Saturday morning she was dead.

That morning I called an ambulance. My family and I myself felt broken and traumatised. But our ordeal wasn't over. I was questioned by the police all morning. I was heartbroken, the mental and physical torture I had to witness was now followed by a police interrogation."

Can we in all conscience put families through this awful trauma? That is the reality of the grey area that currently exists in our law. It is the individual, not the state, who should decide, in a period of terminal illness, whether they want to bring their life to an end. That is why the law should change.

3.43 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The number for the Samaritans is 116 123. If anyone thinks they need help or is contemplating suicide, other than in some of the circumstances that we have heard about, they should think about calling up, sending an email to jo@samaritans.org, visiting a branch, or writing to them.

It is obvious that a lot of people in many countries around the world want to end their lives because of depression or mental pressures, and people ought to start a debate like this by talking about that.

We then ought to get on to what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), who stated that this was not about changing the law. However, it was fairly plain from his speech and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) that they are talking about changing the law, and that was confirmed by the speech we just heard from the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb).

I have experience of some of these issues. My brother's life support was switched off after an accident, and my mother died six hours early because of pain control. My father clearly told me he would never go into a hospice. He said he would go to bed and make sure he did not wake up in the morning. I asked when that would be, and he said, "When I stop playing golf." The third time he gave up golf and put his clubs in my car, I rang my sister and told her what was happening. She told me he had said the same thing about when he stopped playing music.

A year later, I discussed with my father whether he might ever think of going into a home, and he said he would—he never did—and that he had thought about what he would take. He said he might take three CDs with him, because he might want to play music, but he had not actually played any music for six months.

My father's story echoes what the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) said in an early debate on this subject about 20 years ago. Barbara Wootton, the founder of the national assistance service, had made him swear that, if she were in hospital and asked for drugs, he would go and get them from her bathroom cabinet and give them to her. She was in hospital for six months in awkward circumstances, but she never asked.

I spoke earlier of the equivalent of 21,000 people having assisted deaths or euthanasia in the Netherlands. In Switzerland, where Dignitas provides a service for some people, the rate is under half of that in the Netherlands and, I think, Belgium—that needs checking.

Some people say we might have an initial peak but that a second order, polynomial best-fit trend line will show that, in time, the rate of increase slows and the overall rate levels off. That may be so, but what is also so is that 15 jurisdictions in the past two years have decided against changing the law, and 96% of jurisdictions around the world do not have laws that go further than ours.

Of course there are difficult cases, but we should not use hard cases to justify a change that can lead—not will lead, but can lead—to a major change. Nobody in the Netherlands said in 2002 they were anticipating 5,000 assisted suicides or euthanasia cases a year. They did not say it. People may say that because Oregon has not changed further, things there will never change, but in Oregon they are having the same debates about euthanasia as we are having about assisted dying.

There is a whole series of expressions: medical aid in dying, physician-assisted suicide, physician-assisted death, aid in dying, death with dignity, right to die, compassionate death, end-of-life choice, medical assistance at the end of life and advanced care directives, and the like. I understand all that, and I have taken part in more of these debates than anyone else in the Chamber because I have been here longer—I am probably nearer my death than other Members are—but what I want to say to colleagues is that we should not build on individual cases.

Our first lodger was the first person I knew with motor neurone disease. In the days, weeks, months and years before he died, he never once suggested that he wanted to end his life. A constituent of mine—she has authorised me to give her name, but I will not—says that her family has Huntington disease, and most of us know what that involves, and she asked me to oppose this, so I shall.

3.48 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I am glad the House has a chance to think about this again. I also remember Rob Marris's Bill, which I voted against not because I was not sympathetic to the issues but because there was a lot of division among people in my constituency. The question of safeguards came up repeatedly, as I recall.

[Steve McCabe]

What has changed since then, as the Assisted Dying Coalition points out, is that the numbers going to Switzerland have virtually doubled. Parliament now finds itself in a position where we can decide to intervene and change the law, or we can accept random prosecutions, interviews under caution and denying assistance to people who seek it.

Contrary to what the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) said, I think we can draw much better conclusions about safeguards on the basis of Canada's experience. In Canada, assistance is not available to non-residents, and that discourages suicide tourism. Assistance is not available to minors; it is not available to people who have a history of mental illness; and it is not available on the grounds of mental illness, long-term disability or any curable condition. The safeguards include ensuring that none of the legal witnesses or physicians involved has any legal or financial interest in the outcomes of the patient. Consent must be repeatedly expressed, not implied, and consent can be revoked at any time and in any manner. To receive a medically assisted death, patients must be experiencing intolerable suffering and must sign a written request expressing their wish to die. As we have heard, two independent witnesses are required. I would say that those are quite strong safeguards.

We have also heard that the view of the medical profession in this country has changed; I think the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) referred to the Royal College of Physicians, and I know that there will be a poll of the British Medical Association and the Royal College of General Practitioners.

Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to listen to tetraplegic Paul Lamb, who spoke at a humanist event in the House, and I was very moved by the case that this very rational and sane man made. Traditionally, the argument for changing the law is based on the Oregon model, as we have heard, and it generally refers to people who have six months left to live; that was the case with the Marris Bill. I have some difficulty with that, if we are to look at the matter again, because I think there is a problem with being precise about life expectancy. In addition, such a narrow position would not help someone such as Paul Lamb. Paul has been living with his condition for 29 years. He is in intolerable pain that can sometimes only be controlled with very strong medication, which blurs his consciousness and limits his life experiences. He wants the right to choose, if he reaches a stage where he has no quality of life.

We need to focus on quality of life, capacity for life and the rational, sound judgment of a person who makes such a decision. Life expectancy in itself does not tell us anything about suffering. We should be considering assisted dying both in the context of terminal illness and in the context of suffering and a lack of meaningful life. That is especially true when we are talking about progressive conditions, conditions such as locked-in syndrome or intolerable suffering.

Some people have strong views about this subject, and they are influenced by their Church or religious community. Those organisations encourage people to contact MPs, and I understand that it is always going to be like that, but the Supreme Court did ask this place to consider the case for changing the law, and the Court recognised that that was a decision that only Parliament

could make. Having listened to Paul Lamb and thought about it again, I think that we should be wondering whether things have moved on since 2015. The poll that was released by the My Death, My Decision group shows that the level of support for a change in the law is now about 88%. I think that is significant, and I am surprised that people would want to ignore that.

Of course, as the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford said, we are a democracy. It is our job to wrestle with these decisions, not to rely on the fears of particular groups. It is our job to make sure that we get the safeguards right. It seems to me that the choice is simple. We cannot stop assisted dying; we can only prevent legal assisted dying, which would be open, transparent and open to change and challenge.

3.54 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Ten years ago, I worked with some excellent doctors, nurses, patients and carers who were trying to improve clinicians' communication skills to help patients gain a better understanding of long-term conditions and diseases—how to live with their disease and how to die with it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) said, not all clinicians are equipped with the skills necessary to have those conversations. I learned particularly about how lonely it is for people who are dying—it is often nobody's role to talk about dying—and no one has exemplified that today more than my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). It is a very lonely place. I learned that people do not have the control and choice that they otherwise have in their lives, and I learned how hard it is for clinicians to support people. It really opened my eyes and made me determined to change the law even before I came into this place.

It is a pleasure to work with the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) as co-chair of the all-party group. In that capacity, it was my absolute pleasure to welcome and host Geoffrey and Ann Whaley when they came to talk to MPs in February. I welcome Ann to the Chamber, as well as all the other families who have come here to listen to this very measured debate.

When the campaigners, who are very passionate on this subject, come to see me, I talk to them about how to talk to their own MPs, and the first thing I say to them is, "Try to look at the MP in front of you as a human being." We know in this place and in this time in our politics that lots of people do not think we are human beings, and it is difficult, but we are human beings. I say to those campaigners, "You do not know what those human beings you are talking to have experienced in their lives or are currently experiencing in their lives. Please bear that in mind when you start to talk to us."

We are here as human beings, but we are also here as legislators, and legislation is what we are trying to encourage with this debate. Through the all-party group, we are trying to help all of us human beings, with all our failings, prejudices and experiences, to understand the law as it operates, how it affects people and what we need to do to take our responsibility to change that. I am clear that the law needs to change, but I understand that many people have not got to that place. We want to try to help people. In particular, we want to try to get evidence. The call is not just to trade facts and figures, but to collect evidence. I really hope that we can help to move forward on that today.

The story of Geoffrey and Ann really did horrify me, although it is not the first time I have heard it. We have two committed, loving people being treated as criminals for carrying out what was an act of love and compassion. We should also think about the impact on people like those in our police services. Think about the poor police officers who were sent round as this lovely family were trying to manage a terrible situation. Think about the time taken out of their duties and the trauma for them as individuals. That is not acceptable; it is us abrogating our responsibility.

Geoffrey died comfortably at Dignitas only a week after he came to Parliament. He was clear that he was dying before he was ready, and he was terrified about the police investigation. As the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford said, he was a strong man. When he talked to us, the only time his voice faltered was when he talked about that knock on the door, because he was so worried about the impact on his family. He was clear about the hurdles that needed to be jumped to make the decision that he wanted to make, but he was also clear that he did not expect MPs just to change the law. He had high standards for us as MPs. He expected us to collect evidence and to challenge the evidence, and to do so very carefully. He was, as the hon. Gentleman said, cut from some old cloth. He expected us to do a diligent job.

Bob Stewart: It seems to me that the law is grossly unfair. If someone has the resources—we have talked about £10,000—they can go to an alien place and die, with a few family around, and their body can be brought back. But they have to have the money to do it. Currently, our law is not fair, because it differentiates between people who have the resources to end their life when they want to, without the pain and the indignity, and those who cannot afford it, who are the vast majority. That is wrong, and that is where the law has to change.

Karin Smyth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He must have seen the next point in my speech, because it is exactly that. Geoffrey and Ann's story has been the prompt for this debate, but they are not the only family to go through this process. More than 400 Britons have died at Dignitas, and one Briton is dying in Switzerland every eight days. Every person who dies leaves behind a loved one facing the risk of prosecution. He is absolutely right: they have parted with more than £10,000. The family were very open with us that they could afford that, but most of my constituents in Bristol South absolutely cannot afford anywhere near that sort of money. This is a cross-party debate, and people have their individual views, but for me, as a socialist, it is eminently wrong that people who have resources can have that choice and those who do not cannot. That is one of the many reasons why I think we need to change.

The vast majority of people in this country who are dying of a terminal illness can expect a comfortable, dignified and pain-free life. The palliative care service is amazing, and I have worked with many clinicians over time, but they cannot alleviate all symptoms.

I just want to add that a third of patients in Oregon who request assisted dying do not use it. The autonomy that is granted by the choice is very comforting. Autonomy, choice and dignity are important. We must do better with our laws. Our law is outdated, unpopular and

uncompassionate. It is time to look at the undue suffering that the blanket ban on assisted dying is causing people at the end of their life, because compassion is not a crime.

4.1 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): This is undoubtedly a hugely emotive and controversial subject, but I thank the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) and my right hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for giving us the opportunity to discuss it. I am convinced that I have not just a right, but a duty to work for changes in the law that will make it possible for people to have the individual right to choose their own time and manner of death. I am talking about people who, otherwise, will face a situation that will soon be very painful and that will also cause a great deal of stress to their family members. I have been lucky: I have not had to go through the sort of experience that we have heard about from other Members of the House.

Two years ago, I had a conversation with my husband about a friend who, we had just heard, had been given a terminal diagnosis. It was January. We said, "This year will be difficult. Christmas will be difficult. We will have to think about how to deal with it, but it will not be easy for him or for his family." The irony of that conversation has never left me, because neither my husband nor the friend actually lived until Christmas, but the difference was that my husband died very suddenly. Our friend went through a long, painful, lingering death. If there had been a way that he could have been spared that, I would have wanted him to be offered that choice. There is also an irony in the fact that had I had the choice for my husband, I would have chosen the death that he had, rather than the one that our friend had.

The last piece of the ironic jigsaw is that, in this House, if we do make a decision on a change in the law, it will be a free vote, because we will regard how we vote on that law as a matter of conscience. Yet we have never taken up the challenge of giving that same choice, that same freedom of conscience, to the people who actually deserve it. If we are to take up that challenge—and I think we should—it will not be easy and it will not happen quickly. We will have to spend time on it. It will be extremely difficult for us all because we will have to examine our consciences and take into account the views not just of those who feel it is a necessary change, but of those who find it difficult for religious or other moral reasons. But we have a duty to do that.

Like probably every other Member here, I have received numerous letters from constituents this week, asking me to speak up for the change because they have been through experiences like the ones we have heard about so movingly today, and they want and need this change. We would sometimes do well to remember, as I am sure most of us do, that we are here to represent those people. We are told by Dignity in Dying, and in every other poll that has ever been done, that the majority of the public out there—84% at the last time of asking—believe that it is time for a change.

I saw the reports on television this morning about people who are currently facing this decision. They know that death is not far away, and would like to choose the manner of their dying. They would like to

[Christine Jardine]

have what they believe is a good death. It is our duty to do whatever we can, for however long it takes, to ensure that they have that choice.

4.6 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate; I thank the Backbench Business Committee for the time, and congratulate the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on securing it. I am also pleased to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine).

My starting point is the last debate on this matter on 11 September 2015—Second Reading of the Assisted Dying (No. 2) Bill, which was sponsored by the former Member for Wolverhampton South West, Rob Marris, and was moved in the other place by the noble Lord Falconer. I do not often quote myself, but I am going to do so in this case. In fact, I think this is the first time that I have ever quoted me. I said on that occasion:

“There are three key issues here...it is about having the right to choose; secondly, it is about the need to protect the vulnerable against...pressure...thirdly, it is about treating every citizen with the same degree of respect and dignity...On the right to choose, this—I should declare an interest—is personal.”—[*Official Report*, 11 September 2015; Vol. 599, c. 666.]

As many colleagues know, before coming to this place I was a firefighter in the London fire brigade for 23 years, during which time I worked with asbestos. Its heat-resistant properties meant that the fire service used it for all manner of things. For example, we had asbestos gloves and hoods.

I do not know how many people have seen the terminal stages of those with asbestosis or mesothelioma. It is not pretty. It is not as bad as some of the deaths we have heard about—my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) spoke about his dad and we have heard about people with motor neurone disease—but it is not pretty. If that is what lies in store for me, I want the right to choose. I want the right to choose for myself and for everyone faced with that kind of situation, and I challenge colleagues who would deny me or anybody else the right to a dignified end.

Like most people, I want to die in my own home with my own family, and in as much comfort and as little pain as possible. Earlier, I tried to intervene on the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford regarding the references he made to Oregon. One statistic I have not heard quoted in the debate so far is that one third of patients who request assisted dying and meet the eligibility criteria in Oregon do not take the life-ending medication; rather, they want it as an insurance policy. Many actually die of their underlying condition—in some cases outliving their prognosis and not taking the medication because they want to live for as long as they can without suffering.

If I was to be denied the right to choose, I could afford to jet off to Switzerland—this point has been raised by several times Conservative Members—because I have the money, the savings and the pension. However, how many of my constituents in Poplar and Limehouse could afford to do that? Not many, and even if they could afford it, the uncertainty of whether their family

members would be investigated by the police for having helped is a nightmare for somebody hoping to die peacefully.

The right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) and the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) quoted Lord Sumption. The fuller quote says:

“I think the law should continue to criminalise assisted suicide, and I think that the law should be broken from time to time...It has always been the case that it’s been criminal, but it’s also been the case that courageous friends and families have helped people to die...I don’t believe there’s a moral obligation to obey the law. Ultimately it’s for each person to decide.”

Coming from somebody who is a judge in the Supreme Court, that is absolutely breathtaking. The courts have challenged Parliament to address this issue and to clarify the law.

What we have is confusion. The clarification of the guidance by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) when he was the Director of Public Prosecutions, while done with integrity and courage, does not eliminate the risk of prosecution, or certainly investigation and caution. Different constabularies, different doctors and different standards mean that we have not just a two-tier system but a multi-tiered system, and it does not protect the vulnerable. The Bill proposed by the former Member for Wolverhampton South West had 15 safeguards written into it. The law is not as strong today as it would have been had my hon. Friend’s excellent Bill been passed. We need better safeguards, and the 2015 Bill would have provided them.

I want to conclude by thanking the families of the bereaved and campaigners such as Dignity in Dying for the progress that we are making on this issue—because progress is being made. Public opinion is changing. The Lords is almost there and the Commons is slowly coming in behind. I think that eventually we will provide the people of Britain with the right to choose their own end.

4.11 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I do not plan to take the full six minutes, not least because we have heard so many really eloquent and brilliant speeches today. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) and to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for their incredibly moving and powerful contributions.

I supported changing the law in 2015, and I would do so again. I pay tribute to the Members who came to this debate with an open mind and said that they have changed their minds for having the bravery and open-mindedness to do so. I still support changing the law because I believe that it is not working. I want to emphasise three areas where it is not. First, there is the unfairness of the current situation. We have already heard that roughly one person a week goes to Switzerland. However, people go to Switzerland if they have the financial resource, practical resource, and, very often, emotional support to do so. We should not be condemning those without the financial resources to an end that is not of their choosing while other people can afford to go abroad. Even that, I would argue, would not be their first choice and is not the ideal situation, but at least they have the financial means and support to be able to make a choice of some kind. We should be giving that choice to everybody who needs it.

Secondly, the current law results in perverse outcomes. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central and the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) pointed out that it results in people dying sooner than they should. I am not going to repeat those remarks because they put it far better than I could. I pay tribute to them for their speeches.

Thirdly, I want to touch on the issue of palliative care. This debate is often framed as a choice between good palliative care and the right to choose how to die, but that should not be the case. Of course we need to invest in good palliative care—we need the best that we can get—but even with the best palliative care, we cannot stop all suffering at the end of life. A person should have the opportunity to choose their way of dying in addition to the availability of great palliative care.

I also want to respond briefly to three points from the debate. First, I agree very strongly with the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford in his request for a call for evidence to study the experience of Oregon and Canada. I do not share the pessimism of others that we cannot frame legislation that works for the people who need it to work, and gathering that evidence and learning from those examples will, I believe, allow us to do so.

I strongly disagree with the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), who said that introducing assisted dying will lessen the value we put on human life. If we value human life and if we value people, we should allow them to live the life they choose, and that includes the death they choose.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) quoted a statistic about the number of people in Oregon who gave being a burden as their reason for choosing assisted dying. That only tells part of the story, because people who request assisted dying in Oregon give several reasons—

Lyn Brown: It is Washington.

Jeff Smith: People in Oregon and Washington give several reasons. In both those states, the most frequently given reason for requesting to die—by over 90% of people—is a loss of autonomy. Being less able to enjoy life is chosen by around 88%, and a loss of dignity is chosen by around 74%. It is important to tell the whole story with the statistics.

Lyn Brown: I really regret not putting myself down to speak in the debate, because I think there is an absence of understanding about just how difficult it is for many people in this country and elsewhere to withstand the pressures of family who might feel that they are a burden. We are tripping gently into a hellish nightmare for many people. I urge my hon. Friend to listen properly to what people say.

Jeff Smith: I hear what my hon. Friend says, and I accept that there is real concern, but I think we can create a legislative framework that takes account of those concerns and allows safeguards to be put in place to ameliorate those concerns.

In the end, it comes down to one key question: if faced with a terminal illness and a painful end, would we want the death of our choosing for ourselves and for our family? If the answer is yes, as I believe it would be, we should allow that choice for everyone.

4.16 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), although I disagree with most of what he said. That does not mean that my mind is not open.

I wanted to take part in the debate in response to requests from constituents urging me to attend and represent their views. Unsurprisingly, their views are more or less equally split—from the retired GP who urged me not to support any changes, to those who were moved by the very sad case of Geoffrey Whaley to ask whether it would be possible for a change in the law to be made. We all know that this is an emotive issue that divides opinion, with strongly held views on both sides.

I was present in the Chamber the last time we debated this issue, when Rob Marris brought a Bill on assisted dying to the House. On that occasion, 85 Members were hoping to speak, and I was unable to make a contribution due to the huge amount of interest. We must remember that the Bill fell, with 330 Members voting against it and 118 for it. I am proud to say that I voted against the Bill.

I am grateful to be able to make a contribution today, but the views that I held in 2015 have not changed—that does not mean my mind is closed—and I will try to briefly outline why I still feel the same way. My concern then, and my concern now, is that in the current climate, at a time of overstretched NHS budgets and massively underfunded social care, if assisted dying were legalised, it would begin to be seen as an alternative to treatment and care. I believed then, and I believe now, that there is a real risk of a subtle but dangerous culture change in which vulnerable, terminally ill patients come to see assisted dying as a treatment option and the best way to stop themselves becoming a burden to their families, the NHS and wider society.

I worry also about our attitude towards people with disabilities. In 2015, a disability campaigner expressed their concern to me about changes in legislation having the potential to lead to value judgments being made about whether other people's lives are worth living or not and to send out a message that suicide is acceptable in some cases. As the campaigner said to me,

“Someone taking their own life is seen as a tragedy, except if that person is disabled. Then it is seen as understandable.”

I do not believe that there have been any societal changes between then and now that have led to any alteration in attitudes towards those with disabilities, and those concerns remain valid.

The retired GP, whom I referred to earlier, told me that in her career she had been asked on a few occasions by terminally ill patients if she could end their lives for them. She said to me that when she had explored their issues, she found common themes, including the fear of being left alone without support, worrying about suffering from poorly controlled pain for the rest of their lives and the need not to be a burden on medical staff and carers. There were also psychological issues, including profound sadness and despair at their predicament, sometimes accompanied by depressive illness. However, she then told me that, once she had addressed these concerns properly, the request to end life was not made again, and in most cases it had been possible to achieve a dignified and peaceful death.

[Liz McInnes]

If we are to achieve this outcome, it will require good quality palliative care, which does not come cheaply. I speak as a vice-chair of the all-party group on hospices and end of life care. We need to look at the funding of hospices and palliative care, a huge proportion of which comes from charity fundraising, and we need to put the provision of good-quality end of life care on a much more sustainable basis. Some of my constituents who support changes in the law have said to me that they want to see changes because:

“Nobody should be forced to live in unbearable pain.”

I completely agree with that, and that is exactly why we need to make sure that patients receive better palliative care, and to ensure that better information and support are given to terminally ill patients and their families.

I welcome this debate, which forces us to ask the right questions about how we care for the sick and the dying, but I believe strongly that the answer lies in improving palliative care and making it accessible to all those who need it. We need to get that right, rather than changing the law on assisted dying.

4.22 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee; the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who brought forward this debate; and those Members who have described in moving terms their personal experiences. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), who has just spoken in moving terms about the importance of good quality palliative care, because she is absolutely right. As far as I am concerned, this is a “both”: we need better quality, better informed palliative care and we need to change the law on assisted dying.

On Monday morning, I listened to Ann Whaley’s moving account on Radio 4 of the decision her husband Geoff took to die at Dignitas. Last night, I read Annabel Dixon’s blog in which she described, in such loving terms, her sister Jemima’s life and also her death at Dignitas. Both Geoff and Jemima decided, with their different but in both cases degenerative conditions, that the only way to have a good death—in control, a simple act, taking the medicines oneself, with their loved ones around them—and to get around UK legal restrictions was to die in suburban Zurich.

What struck me about both Ann’s account and Annabel’s account was the difficulty of having to go to Zurich, with the logistics of the journey and the pain of travelling as someone who is very sick, as well as the fear of prosecution, and then there is the cost of fees, travel and accommodation for everyone so that loved ones could be with them at their end. Geoff Whaley and Jemima Dixon, and others who have taken the journey to Zurich, had the capacity and the funds to make the arrangements. As others have said, the cost of going to Zurich is beyond the means of most people.

However, we have heard today of other deaths that were not happy—that were not with loved ones present, and where people could not, because of fear of prosecution, discuss their plans with their loved ones—and particularly the account of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield).

Clinicians often feel that they have to take control, and they cannot discuss what they do with anyone else. Very often that is about upping the dose of morphine until the person slips away or, as in the much more tragic story mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), about removing the drugs that were keeping a loved one pain-free and alive. Those actions also removed the possibility of that person and their family discussing their end, which was going to be soon but needed to be pain-free and calm.

Many constituents have written to me supporting a change in the law, and in 2015 I voted to support that change. I assure hon. Members who are concerned about such a change that this debate is not about disabled people, those with life-limiting conditions, or those considering suicide due to depression. It is not about frail elderly people who are worried about being a burden, and it is not about vulnerable people who are at risk of being exploited on their death.

Reading Anna Dixon’s blog gave me an understanding of the level of assessment and scrutiny that was required over several stages before the assisted death in Zurich was permitted. The change to the law under debate today is relevant only to people of sound mind with a terminal illness—those who can predict the rough timing, but also the nature of their own natural death, which will be undignified, painful, and traumatic if they cannot take control. It is relevant to those who want to choose when to end the suffering that they know they and their loved ones will experience.

As we have heard, public opinion is moving behind a change. People of faith are also changing their views. Yesterday I spoke to a colleague whose faith background would generally oppose assisted dying, but who is now minded to support a change in the law. The medical profession is also coming round to support a change, or at least move to a position of neutrality.

I understand the concerns and worries raised by hon. Members today, but we can learn lessons from other jurisdictions that have already implemented the right to an assisted death, and ensure that those concerns are addressed as the law is drafted. We can learn from 20 years of experience in Oregon to ensure that people’s fears are addressed. The UK can, and must, learn from the experience of those states.

I support the proposal to task the Law Commission with looking at this issue. We have to change the law. We owe it to those who know what their final months hold without assisted dying, and who wish to choose the time and place of their passing, and who is with them at their end. We must remove the grey areas for those people and their families.

4.27 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is almost four years since we last debated and voted on this issue, after Rob Marris introduced the Assisted Dying (No.2 Bill), which is now sponsored by Lord Falconer in the other place. I thought it was a thoughtful piece of legislation, and during the last debate I responded from the Front Bench on behalf of the Opposition. It was a highly charged debate, and 85 Members tried to speak. I was slightly surprised that the vote was so decisive, with 330 votes against the Bill and 118 in favour, particularly given that public opinion was then

80%—now perhaps 90%—in favour of such a change to the law. It is unusual for us to lag behind public opinion on matters of social legislation in such a way.

From reading that debate, and from some of the speeches this afternoon, I appreciate that a number of Members speak from a religious perspective. I entirely respect that and their right to make their own decisions, but I do not agree that they should be able to impose those decisions on me or those of my constituents who do not necessarily share that outlook. We have talked about choice, which is important, but I think this issue goes further than that. The ability to choose the time and manner of one's own death under the circumstances that have been described, sometimes in horrific terms, is a basic human right. That is particularly true when we consider the issue of people's means because, as many Members have said, someone's ability to make that choice is restricted to those who can afford the organisation, time, money and support to go to Switzerland or somewhere else abroad.

The arguments about dignity and suffering have been very well made and are very difficult to rebut, but the more one looks into this the more compelling the case becomes. I met Ann and Geoffrey Whaley when they visited this House the week before Geoffrey went to the Dignitas clinic. Meeting them was one of the most profound things to have happened to me since becoming a Member. It was extraordinary to witness not just their courage but the certainty and the measured way in which they put forward their arguments. I pay tribute to them. They then had to go through the stress of a police interview. The fact that the police, I gather, interview in about 50% of such cases, is itself strange, but in 100% of cases the threat is there for those relatives—the feeling that the police might turn up on your doorstep at the most vulnerable time in your life.

There is also the risk of forfeiture, or at least having to go to the courts to apply for relief from forfeiture, because it is quite possible that joint assets cannot pass to a succeeding spouse, for example, because of their involvement in that regard.

Fiona Bruce: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise, though, that it is that concern that the police might call that protects so many vulnerable people from abuse? If we do away with that, there will be no reason for relatives not to support or even encourage vulnerable relatives to consider assisted suicide. What sanction will there be?

Andy Slaughter: I do not think the hon. Lady does herself any favours by making that argument. It is quite barbaric to think that relatives may sit in fear of a knock on the door from the police. The police themselves are in a very difficult situation. As Ann Whaley recalled, the police felt that they had to go through with an obligation which they perhaps did not want placed upon them.

Consider the case of Tony Nicklinson, who lost his case in the higher courts. I make no criticism of the higher courts—I think this is a matter for us rather than the judiciary—but he effectively had to starve himself to death to achieve the same objectives. The fact that people are going to their deaths earlier than they need to, and going through the most distressing of additional circumstances to do so, should prick our

consciences rather more than it does. On the other hand, I do understand—this is why I have moved over a period of time—the arguments about undue influence and the slippery slope. It is important to look at what safeguards are there. I believe, from what we have heard today, that the safeguards are there, but I also believe that this is a balancing act.

Members will perhaps be aware of the case of another very brave man, Phil Newby, another sufferer of motor neurone disease, who is crowdfunding at the moment to take a case on the basis of proportionality. Yes, there are rights for those who are in a difficult circumstance and who might fear, or feel, pressure on them, but there are rights for those who are in great distress because they feel the need to end their own lives and are unable to do so.

The medical profession was mentioned by a number of hon. Members. I think there is a change of mood. If one looks at the Royal College of Physicians, the direction of travel even over the past decade has been from 70% of its members being against a change in the law to about 50% now. I think that trend will continue. I understand the additional pressures it would put on the medical profession. I understand that for some it looks like a conflict of interest and a compromise of their role, but I feel that everybody must take a mature view and I believe that opinion in the medical profession is changing.

I think we all support good quality palliative care for a number of reasons, including taking the pressure off the acute sector and off our hospitals. A palliative care setting can often be the best place to die. I am furious that the Pembridge palliative care unit, which serves my constituents, is being decommissioned; we only learnt of that last week. It is an excellent unit, and I will fight to preserve it. However, I do not believe that there is a conflict there with what we are discussing today. The two things sit alongside each other. They are both matters of compassion, and about doing the best for people in extremis in the most difficult parts of their lives.

So, with a lot of thought, I support what has been said and I congratulate the Members who tabled the motion.

4.35 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On 4 June, in making the case for holding this debate to the Backbench Business Committee, the basic justification set out by the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) was that a lot has changed since the House last debated these matters, and therefore it would be opportune for the House to have an opportunity to discuss them. I would like to go into that in some detail, in the short time that I have.

First, I want to say that I respect the views of others in the House greatly, and I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will respect my point of view, which may be very different from some of those expressed in today's debate. I am a man of faith. My father was a man of faith; he died, and I know he believed in the sanctity of life, as do I. I believe that in my constituency of Strangford, the vast majority of my constituents also believe in the sanctity of life, and they also believe that the law should not be changed. I want to put that on the record at the start of my speech.

[Jim Shannon]

Both the Royal College of Nursing and the Royal College of Physicians have moved to adopt a position of neutrality on the question of assisted suicide. The Royal College of Nursing actually adopted its position of neutrality some 10 years ago—six years before the Marris Bill came to this House. Neutrality is far from endorsement, and that has to be understood. It no more gives grounds to positively endorse assisted suicide in 2019 than it did in 2015.

The manner in which the Royal College of Physicians approached its poll, however, has had the effect of leaving a significant cloud hanging over it. In the 2014 poll, those who opposed assisted suicide were 44.4%; in the 2019 poll, they were 43.4%. The proportion opposed to assisted suicide is the largest by a significant margin, and almost identical to the 2014 result. For the Opposition side of the House—indeed, it is important for the whole House—I point out that in Tony Blair's landslide 1997 general election victory, he received 43.2% of the vote. The Royal College of Physicians actually voted against this change by 43.4%. So there is a figure, when we come to stats in this House.

Before that poll, however, the council of the Royal College of Physicians, without consulting its members, decided that it wanted to go neutral, and structured the rules of the contest in such a way that that was bound to be the outcome. It took the extraordinary step of saying that unless 66% of respondents either opposed or supported assisted suicide, the college would adopt a neutral position. From that very moment, the result was a foregone conclusion. I want to talk about some reasons why it is the wrong one, and worded the wrong way.

Professor John Saunders, a former chair of the RCP's ethical issues in medicine committee, wrote in *The Guardian* to accuse the college of carrying out
“a sham poll with a rigged outcome”.

Over 1,500 doctors and medical students signed an online petition expressing alarm over the college's behaviour. Professor Albert Weale, chair of the college's ethical issues in medicine committee, resigned in protest. He claimed that the RCP council failed to take notice of ethical advice that the committee had provided on the subject of the poll.

Crispin Blunt: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim Shannon: I am sorry; my speech is subject to a time limit.

Professor Weale commented:

“There is simply no point in the committee offering reasoned positions if they are ignored by council.”

The process has resulted in a legal challenge, which is ongoing, and damaging criticism from the Charity Commission as well:

“It is unclear whether the Council took into account that”
the majority of at least 60% required
“would make it almost impossible to achieve”
that majority.

In looking at the results of the RCP survey, it is very important to consider the detailed response to the 2019 poll by specialty. It reveals that those whose specialism means that they have a real expertise in the field of

death and dying remain overwhelmingly opposed to assisted suicide: 80.9% of those participating in the poll working in palliative medicine were opposed to a change in the law. Some 48.3% working in respiratory medicine were opposed, 44.1% in geriatric medicine, 43.5% in neurology and 43.4% in gastroenterology. Again, those figures tell the story.

I appreciate that the Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Association have said that they will poll their members on this issue, but we do not have any results yet. Both those bodies would be well advised to study the RCP experience and learn from its mistakes. In that regard, they would do well to study an important new paper written by the former chair of the ethics committee, Professor Weale. They would find it very helpful indeed.

There were questions about the wording of the ComRes poll. In Dr Al Baghal's executive summary of his review of the poll, he says:

“Overall, we would caution MPs and the public...There are a number of problems noted with this survey.”

Those problems included the fact that the poll is likely to be unrepresentative because of the demographic profile of respondents; the fact that only one side of the argument was presented to respondents in the question wording, using emotive language including terms such as “unbearable suffering”; and the fact that response options for several questions were designed such that they led people to choose a certain answer, even if they did not have a strong opinion, and may have led to respondents tending to select positive options even if that was not their settled opinion.

The basic problem with the proposal to legalise assisted suicide remains unchanged. It costs about £5 to give someone a lethal dose of barbiturates. It costs between £3,000 and £4,000 to keep someone in a hospice for a week. In that context, the right to die for the eloquent and financially well off will become a duty to die for the vulnerable. That is how I and other hon. Members feel, and it is deeply shocking that anyone living in a so-called civilised society should avail themselves of a state-sanctioned means of killing themselves.

In both Oregon and Washington State, 52% of those questioned said that not wanting to become a burden was one of the motivations for their decision. I have no desire to live under a law like that, and no desire therefore to see the legalisation of assisted suicide in the UK. We need a system that supports and helps families so that no one feels they are a burden, and I will push for change on this rather than in the current law.

4.41 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): There is no doubt that this is a deeply sensitive debate on matters of considerable gravity, and I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this important debate this afternoon. The topic of taking a life is not one that this House can or should debate lightly, and clear opinions—including strong points and robust arguments—have been expressed on both sides this afternoon, including by Members who have been directly affected. We heard from the hon. Members for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) and for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi),

who all referred to personal experiences. We also heard the passionate and emotional speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). It is always difficult to stand up in this place and refer to very personal matters. Whether we agree on those matters or not, we should pay tribute to hon. Members who show bravery in talking about their experiences.

In the short time I have, I will seek to summarise the debate so far. We have heard arguments made about why the law on assisted dying should be changed. The primary point that is put forward for changing the law is that it would end individuals' suffering in the final days, weeks and months of their lives after having been put through the tortures of terminal illness. A further point about individual liberty is also made, with hon. Members stating that we have free will, are responsible for our own lives and should be able to choose the time and place of our passing when we face a terminal illness. Many state that the safeguards that would be absolutely necessary should assisted dying be legalised can be put into place to prevent abuse of the system. Several hon. Members have mentioned the finances and the fact that if one has means, one is able to travel out of the country, but none of these issues should ever be linked to one's ability to pay.

There is resistance to changing the law, and as some hon. Members have pointed out, any attempt to legalise assisted dying for people with terminal illnesses represents a slippery slope that can start with legalised assisted dying but then escalate to legalised assisted suicide and legalised euthanasia. Such a situation, it is argued, would be beyond what was originally envisaged in legalisation for assisted dying and could lead to further issues. For instance, people with terminal illnesses or chronic conditions, particularly the elderly, could see themselves as being a burden on their friends and families and could opt to end their lives to allow them to escape those perceived pressures. Another concern is that the elderly and those with medical conditions could be pressured into ending their lives against their will by a number of different people.

There has been some resistance from the medical profession—the British Medical Association has set out its opposition to the policy, and the Royal College of Nursing has refused to advocate it—although a number of Members have rightly pointed out that the profession's position has also been shifting of late.

One of the positives that will emerge from this debate is that we are talking about death, because, as a country, we do not do that enough. Death is one of society's last great taboos, which we still have not overcome. We close up and do not discuss it, because we think that by not discussing it we can avoid it—can prevent it from happening to our friends and family, to those whom we care about and to ourselves. We do not have these conversations often enough or engage in them deeply enough, particularly when a friend or family member is suffering from a terminal illness and approaching the end of their life. That is one of the reasons why palliative and end-of-life care is not as good as it could be, and why too many people are reaching the end of their lives in hospital rather than in their own homes, surrounded by their families.

There is no reason why we, as a society, cannot provide end-of-life care that provides full pain relief and soothes mental distress. That is why we have committed

ourselves to providing free social care for those on the palliative care register, starting with those with the highest needs, so that no one will have to die in hospital for want of a social care package of support.

Time does not permit me to say much more; I have already exceeded my allocated time by a few seconds. Let me end by saying that this is a clear issue of conscience. Members on both sides of the debate have advanced strong and robust arguments. If we are to take one thing from the debate, it must be a commitment to improving the care received by those approaching the end of their lives and to giving them dignity in death.

4.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will endeavour to conclude my speech a few minutes before 5 o'clock to allow the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) a few minutes in which to respond, if he wishes to do so.

It is rare for a Private Member's Bill Friday to be one of the most memorable occasions in the House, but the debate that took place in 2015 on a private Member's Bill on this subject was one of the most memorable during my time in the House thus far. It was a crowded House; the speeches were many and of an exceptionally high quality; and the Division saw an exceptionally large number of Members voting on a Private Member's Bill. It was an example of the House at its best, debating a deeply emotive issue of huge significance in a dignified, informed and passionate but also respectful manner. The same is true of today's debate, which it is a privilege to wind up on behalf of Her Majesty's Government.

I have been contacted by a number of constituents with different views on this subject, as, I am sure, have many other Members. They have asked me to attend the debate and to speak in it. I had to say to them that while, as a Minister, I would endeavour to attend, I would not be able to speak; but, having been nominated by the Government to respond, I can now say that it is a privilege to do so.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford on securing the debate. Indeed, I congratulate all 26 Members who have spoken, including the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain). I will turn to their individual comments shortly, but all spoke with sincerity and from the heart.

Since that 2015 debate, legal and other developments and campaigns have served to keep this issue very much in the public eye. In respect of campaigners in the House, it behoves me to mention one of my hon. Friends who, by virtue of his ministerial office, can no longer campaign and speak about the issue. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) did a great deal in this regard before becoming a Minister. We have seen various opinion polls and media coverage, most recently on Radio 4's "Today" programme, focused on this issue.

The Government's position remains that any changes to the law in this area remain an issue of conscience for individual Members of this House, and it is right that this is so given the strength of the deeply and sincerely held views on both sides of this debate. It remains a matter for this House to decide, not the Government, but a Government must implement and work with whatever

[*Edward Argar*]

this Parliament and future Parliaments decide. In the recent lectures by Lord Sumption, which a number of Members have alluded to, he touched on this issue, and while it is important that the courts should, and do, interpret the law, Parliament cannot and should not seek to avoid or outsource decisions on such profound moral questions to them. It is for this Parliament to debate and to determine the law in this area.

As I mentioned, powerful and moving arguments are put by both sides, and we have heard many of them today. Those speeches whether in favour of or opposing a change in the law were equally motivated by compassion and a sense of humanity. Those who oppose changes to the current framework do so from the basis of profoundly held views about the sanctity of human life and about the position a change could place medical professionals in, and because they have genuinely held concerns about whether vulnerable people, or people with a serious and terminal illness who are at their lowest ebb, may feel pressure, real or imagined, to take such a step, and they fear that no safeguards, however well-designed, could adequately protect against this.

We heard very powerful speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and the hon. Members for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and although the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) did not make a speech, she intervened on a number of occasions powerfully and movingly.

Those who advocate change again do so on the basis of sincerely held and equally strong views. No one can fail to be deeply moved by the situations in individual cases described by people as they set out the terrible choices they and their loved ones faced, and in that context, I pay tribute to the dignity shown by Ann Whaley in her campaigning on this issue, reflecting her situation and that of her husband, Geoffrey, which I know has deeply moved Members of this House and, indeed, those outside this place.

I would like to recognise those across the country who have campaigned, including a number of my constituents—for example, those in the Leicestershire and Rutland Dignity in Dying group. They have contacted me, as I am sure different groups and individuals will have contacted other Members or even come to see them to set out with conviction, sincerity and always courtesy their reasons for wishing to see this House reflect on the law and consider changing it. They wish to see the law changed to allow those who are terminally ill and in great pain, and who have the ability to make such a decision, to decide what they wish to do with their own body and life and their right to have a choice in ending that life with dignity, and with assistance if they need it, without fear for them or their loved ones. They have set out, as I said, their case with equal dignity, and I pay tribute to them all now.

I turn to the Members who spoke very powerfully in support of changes in this space, and I pick out to start with of course my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford, who spoke deeply movingly and, I know, on a very personal basis. He asked a very specific point about a call for evidence. I know that he has recently met and spoken to my right hon. Friend the Secretary

of State for Justice, where he put, with typical eloquence and persuasiveness, his case. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is reflecting carefully on the case that the hon. Gentleman put to him.

Other hon. Members spoke movingly from a personal perspective in arguing for a change. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) spoke with incredible dignity and courage in sharing his very personal story with us and those beyond this place, and he did it because he believed that that was the right thing to do to advance this debate. I pay tribute to him. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and the hon. Members for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) for their very personal stories, and to the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) for his willingness to share a very personal story reflecting his position. I would say to him that, whatever view one takes on this issue or others, the willingness to change one's mind is a sign of strength and never of weakness.

I will reference other hon. Members, but I will not go into what they said, owing to pressure of time. They are my hon. Friends the Members for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) and for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and the hon. Members for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury). I think that I have referenced every right hon. and hon. Member who has spoken. They all spoke with passion, with clarity and with a true sense of the tone in which we would wish the House to conduct this debate. I pay tribute to them all.

This has been a humbling debate to listen to and to have the opportunity to wind up. The views on both sides of the debate have been reflected with eloquence and dignity in the House. This Parliament has a responsibility to the people we represent. It has a responsibility to deliberate on behalf of our nation on the most difficult questions that we consider, and this is certainly among them. It is right that the House continues to do this, and I believe that the tone and content of this debate reflect how those who send us to this place would wish us to conduct ourselves.

4.57 pm

Nick Boles: I should like to thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and your colleague Deputy Speaker very much for chairing this debate so well. I should also like to thank all hon. Members for contributing to it so powerfully and persuasively. I would particularly like to thank Ann Whaley for attending the debate. She has inspired us all to be here, and, whatever arguments we have made, I know that we all think she is a truly marvellous woman. Her husband would be very proud of her today. I would also like to thank all the other family members and those suffering from terminal illnesses who have taken the trouble, at a time of great stress in their lives, to join us and to observe our debate.

I should like to end on this note. I have changed my mind about this issue. Many people have changed their minds about it, and I hope that more people will change

their minds about it so that we can get on and change the law and make this country a more humane place for people to live and die.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the functioning of the existing law relating to assisted dying.

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, in respect of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill, notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.—(*Iain Stewart.*)

NHS Procurement and Subcontractor Exclusion

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

4.59 pm

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): I requested this debate this afternoon not only to put right a wrong that has been done to a long-established business in my constituency, but to highlight wider issues about Government procurement policy, particularly in relation to the national health service. The Government rightly talk about delivering a Brexit that supports UK businesses, jobs and our standard of living. However, this sorry story illustrates how, even before Brexit, we are unable to create a level playing field for our companies, let alone back them up. In this case, the EU cannot be blamed for a lack of transparency or fair competition, or for the exclusion of a UK company from an NHS preferred supplier list.

Under NHS ProCure22, the Department of Health and Social Care appointed Kier as a tier 1 provider to decide who should be the preferred providers for floor covering in NHS facilities. In May 2018, without any competitive tendering or other transparent process, it was announced that three overseas companies would be on the preferred supplier list—two French companies, Tarkett and Gerflor, and a Swiss company, Forbo. James Halstead, a UK plc from my constituency with a 50-year track record of supplying NHS institutions was not on the list or even given the opportunity to tender or participate in dialogue with Kier.

Halstead is highly successful global business that we are proud of in Radcliffe, with a global turnover of £250 million and a UK turnover of £83 million. The NHS currently accounts for approximately 15% of that UK turnover. A significant proportion of that is now at risk, and there is the also potential reputational damage of being excluded from the list for unstated reasons. Many NHS organisations are understandably asking Halstead why it is not on the list. That would be bad enough in any circumstances, but things have been made worse by the recent track record of the three overseas companies.

In October 2017, the three companies were found guilty of price fixing over a 23-year period in France, and the French competition authority fined them a total of £302 million. They were found to have discussed minimum prices, price increases, sales policy and other sensitive information, such as their trading volumes. The French regulators discovered that the companies had also exchanged confidential, recent and detailed information on their sales volumes and commercial forecasts. That information was exchanged through the SFEC, a sectoral trade union in France, which was in charge of collecting the information and sharing it with manufacturers. It is surprising—some would say staggering—that seven months later these same companies were given a monopoly as preferred suppliers for the NHS. In addition, it is worth noting that Tarkett pays no UK taxes whatsoever. To be clear, it is not breaking any laws in doing so, but that does not mean that there are no ethical and fairness issues.

I have several questions for the Minister, and if he is unable to answer them today, I would be grateful if he wrote to me in detail. What criteria did Kier use to draw

[Mr Ivan Lewis]

up the preferred supplier list? In the absence of competitive tendering, what process did it use? Why were Halstead and other suppliers not included on the list or given the opportunity to put their case? What consideration was given to the probity of the three overseas companies in view of the sanctions imposed on them in France?

Will the Minister assure me—this is incredibly important—that Kier will be instructed to add Halstead, and any other appropriate company, to the list as a matter of urgency? Will the Minister initiate a review of all such NHS contractor lists with a view to identifying how many are drawn up without a competitive tendering or transparent process? Finally, will the Minister issue an instruction in due course that NHS staff and third parties, such as tier 1 providers, appointed on the NHS's behalf to commission goods and services should have a duty to be proactive in encouraging UK companies to apply or bid, depending on the relevant process?

I believe that this case has wider implications for UK Government and NHS procurement policy than simply the effects on the business in my constituency. I want to make it clear that this is not about saying that, in an unlawful manner, the NHS or the Government should favour UK companies over foreign companies. That is not the case whatsoever, so officials should not try to deflect us away from the substantive issues here. The issue is that a UK company with a good track record, a history of financial probity, and quality goods and services should be on this list. It has never been sanctioned by any regulatory authority. In contrast, these three overseas companies were significantly sanctioned, less than a year before the NHS's decision, for price fixing—basically operating a cartel in France—over a 23-year period.

Clearly this is not a matter of direct ministerial responsibility and, having been a Health Minister, I do not hold the Minister personally responsible for individual procurement and tendering decisions, but Ministers are responsible for policy and oversight in this area. There has either been incompetence by those charged with these responsibilities or, frankly, something stinks in Kier's decision-making process in this case.

I would be incredibly grateful if the Minister responded to my substantive points, considered the wider implications for UK Government and NHS procurement and put right, as a matter of urgency, the wrong done to Halstead plc in my constituency.

5.6 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): It is a pleasure to respond, and I thank the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) for securing this debate to highlight an issue about which he rightly feels very strongly, as it affects a company in his constituency.

The title of this debate highlights the two things the hon. Gentleman wants to raise. The first is the specific issue and, as I have some time, I will talk a little about procurement processes with subcontractors in general, too. He highlights an issue with a specific framework contract that, as he rightly says, is managed by my Department.

The specific issue the hon. Gentleman raises is on the use of subcontractors in the flooring industry under the construction framework ProCure22. The issue was originally

raised through the Government public procurement review service, hosted by the Cabinet Office, back in December 2018. A response was provided by officials at the time and is on the Government website.

The hon. Gentleman asked a number of direct questions, which I will tackle later in my speech. I hope to satisfy him but, if not, I will, of course, be very happy to write to him.

The issue, as the hon. Gentleman says, is that one of the suppliers under the P22 framework is using three companies based in the European Union and that a supplier in his constituency is not being used. He is not seeking to suggest that suppliers be excluded for unlawful reasons, but he is suggesting that the supplier in his constituency has been excluded because there was not a fair competition. That is the essence of what he said.

On the competition question, the hon. Gentleman will know that my Department and the Cabinet Office provided a response saying that, although we have some influence over subcontractors under the ProCure22 framework, this only relates to certain tier 1 subcontractors that are primary supply chain members. They are required to pass a certain series of checks with the authority before they can be registered. Those checks are limited to organisations undertaking certain roles and do not extend to the suppliers of flooring products. The principal supply chain partners have been selected through an appropriate procurement process, in line with the Public Contracts Regulations 2015. Those companies are then free to build their own supply chains, which is where the company in the hon. Gentleman's constituency is at odds. The company leading the supply chain is not always bound by public sector procurement regulations. I am obviously aware of the French authorities imposing a fine on the three companies at the end of 2017, and I want to address some of his remarks on that in a moment.

Officials in my Department have met supply chain partners on a regular basis, and we seek wherever possible to encourage the use of UK-based SME subcontractors. As the hon. Gentleman said, we have a duty to the public sector to deliver value for money. It is for our supply chain partners to demonstrate that that is the case with each of their products.

I think the hon. Gentleman is concerned that my Department has not replied to a letter from Halstead—the aggrieved company in question—of January this year. I can confirm that the Department received the letter from DWF lawyers, acting on Halstead's behalf. The letter was addressed to me on 16 January, and my Department has a record of a reply being sent on 13 February, referring DWF to the response that had been published on the public procurement review service that I referred to earlier. If the hon. Gentleman does not have a copy of that reply, or if he finds when he speaks to Halstead that it does not have a copy or the lawyers have not passed it on, I will be happy to sort that out.

Officials in my Department have engaged with Halstead directly—that engagement started in March 2018—to explain how the framework operated. I hope that the company will be able to confirm to the hon. Gentleman that officials have responded fairly promptly to any questions that have been raised. I understand that Halstead has used that feedback and is currently bidding to form part of the supply chain.

The hon. Gentleman asked a large number of very specific questions, and given that the House has a little bit of time tonight, I thought I might try to respond to them now rather than writing to him.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I take an interest in this matter because I have a large and very successful district hospital in my constituency. I listened with care to what the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) said. It seems to me that what we want in public procurement—not just in the NHS, but across the public service—is for the best contractor to do the best job at the best price for the public purse, but always in a framework, as the hon. Gentleman wisely said, of fair competition. If that has not happened in this case, does the Minister believe that that is because of a structural problem with the P22 framework, or is a local difficulty to blame?

Stephen Hammond: I want to speak about the overall process later in my speech. Having been to Nottingham to open the national procurement centre for the NHS last week, I am clear that we should have the best procurement processes in place to ensure that money from the public purse is spent wisely. That is even more important in the health service than it is in almost any other part of the public sector, because money spent wisely means better patient care, and that is key.

I hope that I will be able to prove to my hon. Friend and the hon. Gentleman that the problem with this contract was not with the framework itself, but with how one particular company chose to apply the criteria. I am not saying that the company necessarily applied the criteria inaccurately or wrongly, but it did not do so in a way that we would normally encourage.

Mr Ivan Lewis: I thank the Minister for the openness and frankness of his response so far. His last comment was very telling, because he acknowledged that in these circumstances, Kier perhaps did not behave in accordance with best practice or what would usually be expected, even if it did not do anything unlawful. If possible, I want clarity on whether the Minister or his officials have had, or will have, strong words with Kier about what the situation has exposed and the unfairness that has been applied to the company in my constituency. Will he or his officials have that conversation with Kier about what is expected of it, or have they done so already?

Stephen Hammond: To be absolutely clear, I was not suggesting that Kier had not necessarily followed best practice, and it certainly had not acted unlawfully. I was suggesting that, as I said a moment ago, we would encourage all the people who use the frameworks to ensure that there are opportunities for UK firms to be on those frameworks.

Let me try to answer directly some of the hon. Gentleman's questions. He asked what criteria Kier used to draw up the supplier list. As I explained, in respect of how the framework is set up, the Department ensures that the principal supplier on the framework is there correctly, appropriately and legally. It is not for the Department to comment on the criteria that private sector organisations use to draw up their supplier lists. The Department sets out the expectation of the principal supply chain partners, and our expectation on them is to ensure that supply chains provide value-for-money,

quality services for the public sector. Understandably, because of the nature of what is being procured, each supply chain partner will have its own processes and prequalification criteria.

The hon. Gentleman asked me directly what processes were used in the absence of competitive tendering. Again, it is not for the Department to comment directly on the specific processes, but I can confirm that each of the supply chain partners needs to follow its own internal policies, and those policies and procedures must align with the requirements of the framework.

The hon. Gentleman asked directly why Halstead and other suppliers that were not included on the list were not necessarily given the opportunity to put their case. The Department does not have visibility of which suppliers were given the opportunity to put their case; however, Halstead is now discussing that with the supply chain partners. As I said, Halstead has spoken to officials at my Department, and that communication goes back as far as March 2018. I understand that Halstead is now using that feedback and is bidding to form part of the supply chain. We give the undertaking that the application will be considered fairly and scored against the set criteria.

The hon. Gentleman asked me directly about what consideration was given to the probity of the three overseas companies, given that sanctions were imposed on them in France.

Mr Lewis: The Minister said that the application will be tested against the set criteria, but he cannot tell me what those criteria are. Is that a fair reflection of the situation?

Stephen Hammond: As I said earlier in my remarks, each principal supply chain partner must make sure that their internal policies and procedures align with the requirements of the framework, but it is not for the Department to tell each principal supply partner how to set out their criteria, nor the specific processes they should use. The hon. Gentleman rightly made the point that is my Department's responsibility to ensure that the policy is correct. I hope he is hearing that my Department ensures that the right procedures and processes are in place and that the individual principal supply chain partner must choose the most appropriate one for the right framework it is on. I hope he will accept that.

I was just about to refer to the issue of the three overseas companies that were chosen and the sanctions that were imposed on them. As I said earlier, I am aware that the French authorities imposed the fine on the three companies at the end of 2017, but those convictions were imposed after the preferred supplier list was established. Clearly, the Department does not have sight of the contractual agreements between the supply chain partners and the suppliers. The supply chain partners are not within the scope of the Public Contract Regulations 2015.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether I could assure him that Kier would be instructed to add Halstead to the list as a matter of urgency. He will know, obviously, that it is not within my remit or my ability to instruct private sector organisations to engage with specific companies, but I can reassure him that Halstead is currently bidding as part of the refresh of the Kier supplier list and its application will, I know, be scored on the merit of the criteria set. I hope that that reassures him.

[*Stephen Hammond*]

I want to turn briefly to how the Department supports and encourages small and medium-sized enterprises and subcontractors more generally. Clearly, we have been dealing with some very specific issues, and that underlines the complexity of the procurement landscape. The understanding of who exactly subcontractors are, and the work that they undertake, is, by its very nature, not well understood unless it is for a very major significant construction project. NHS organisations would usually expect the Crown Commercial Service or the regional procurement solution to identify and track the supply chain of the suppliers providing the goods, works or services. However, there is currently a limited understanding of the suppliers on locally negotiated contracts.

The Public Contract Regulations 2015 clearly allow public sector organisations to permit subcontracting within supply chains as long as the subcontractors meet the minimum standards set out, and the hon. Gentleman knows that I have just set those out. Where issues in subcontractor performance arise, the regulations also allow for the subcontractor to be excluded.

The Department's SME action plan for 2019-20 highlights the actions that we are taking to make it easier for SMEs to work with the whole of the health supply system. The Department has a target of 23% of our direct and indirect spend with SMEs by the end of March 2022.

Peter Heaton-Jones: Notwithstanding the note that the Minister might just have been passed—[*Interruption.*] This is an important point. I have mentioned already the fine hospital that I have in my constituency, but I also have many fine SMEs, which need to be on a level playing field when it comes to being able to tender for these sorts of procurement contracts. What I am looking for the Minister to give me and, I am sure, to other hon. Members with fine SMEs in their constituencies is an assurance that they have that level playing field and that they can get these contracts.

Stephen Hammond: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. It is absolutely the commitment of the Government to ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises are not excluded from any form of public sector procurement. I am pleased to say that the Department has published an action plan to that effect. I am actually the Minister in charge of ensuring that that action plan is implemented, and I am pleased to say that the Cabinet

Office holds meetings of ministerial champions across Whitehall to ensure that, as a Government, we meet our targets.

Mr Lewis: May I ask the Minister about a really important point of clarification? Are Kier or similar organisations fulfilling that function required to publish the basis on which they make these decisions? The Minister has said that it is not for the Department to tell such organisations how to fulfil their responsibilities in drawing up these lists, but are those organisations required to publish, openly and transparently, the basis on which they make decisions about their preferred suppliers?

Stephen Hammond: What I can say to the hon. Gentleman—he has heard me say this twice, and I am happy to have a longer discussion with him outside this debate—is that there is a process in place whereby principal supply chain partners are on the framework. If they are on that framework, they have to ensure that their policies, procedures and the criteria they intend to use align with that framework. As private sector organisations that have been contracted by the public sector, they in turn have subcontractors, and they have to ensure that the processes they use to contract those subcontractors are compliant with the framework. I am happy to set that out in writing for the hon. Gentleman, if he would like me to. Clearly, the Department cannot and does not instruct principal supply partners to detail every aspect but, as I have said to him before, we have to be reassured that the processes and procedures they use are compliant with what we have set out in the framework.

This has been a fascinating debate because it gets to the heart of what we want to do. If we want to have a vibrant economy, we must have transparency regarding how companies contract for public sector contracts and the supply thereof. What the hon. Gentleman has rightly done on behalf of his constituents is to ensure that the Department is clear and has investigated that the processes and procedures being used were the correct ones, and that if, as he believes, his constituents were unfairly treated, the Department looks into the case. My officials have been in regular contact with Halstead since 2018 and I am pleased that it is now able to refresh its application for the subcontract list. I am also pleased to have had the chance briefly to set out the Government's overall ambitions to ensure that all small and medium-sized enterprises are able to bid for Government contracts.

Question put and agreed to.

5.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 4 July 2019

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

Forced Displacement in Africa

1.30 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Tenth Report of the International Development Committee, Forced displacement in Africa: Anchors not walls, HC 1433, and the Government response, HC 2357.

As ever, Mr Evans, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, not least because you serve as a distinguished member of the Select Committee on International Development. In February of this year we released our report on forced displacement, and last month the Government published their response. A year ago we invited submissions on all aspects of this broad issue, and I am grateful to everyone who gave evidence to our inquiry, both in person and in writing. I thank all members of the Select Committee for their participation.

As part of our inquiry, we visited Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia to look at first hand at the UK's support for Governments, UN agencies and non-governmental organisations that are providing shelter and services for those forcibly displaced in east Africa. We were extremely grateful for the assistance, engagement and openness that, as ever, we encountered on that visit. We are also hugely grateful for the hard work of staff from the Department for International Development and the Foreign Office in making the visit a success, and for the broad range of interlocutors from the Governments in the three countries, the United Nations, various multilateral organisations, and of course civil society. In the context of today's debate, I particularly thank the refugees and host community members who we met as part of those visits for their courage in sharing their stories and experiences with us.

Globally, we are in the midst of the greatest displacement crisis on record. Last month, on World Refugee Day, the latest data was published, showing that 70.8 million people around the world are displaced from their homes—more than the entire population of the United Kingdom. It is an increase of more than 2 million on the previous year, and to compare it with 10 years ago, the figure in 2009 was 43.3 million. Most of the people who are displaced remain within their own country—internally displaced persons, in the jargon. A further 29.5 million are refugees or asylum seekers—in other words, they have crossed an international border. However, we say that regardless of whether those displaced people are still in their own country or have crossed a border, they are among the most vulnerable anywhere in our world, and most at risk of being left behind as the world strives to achieve the sustainable development goals.

More than 20 million of those displaced people live in sub-Saharan Africa; by definition, in some of the poorest countries in the world. Seven of the top 10 countries of origin for refugees and three of the top 10 countries for hosting refugees are in sub-Saharan Africa, yet the African refugee crisis rarely makes the headlines, even compared with other refugee crises in recent years. We were impressed by the generosity that we saw during

our visit to east Africa. Uganda, Ethiopia and Sudan each host around 1 million refugees and asylum seekers, but we know that generosity alone is not enough. The African Union has declared this year to be the year of refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons.

Last December, the United Nations—including the United Kingdom—signed up to a new global compact for refugees, the aim of which is to improve support and share responsibility for hosting displaced people more equitably between the wealthier and poorer countries of the world. That global compact recognises that a number of countries are responsible for hosting most refugees, and that often the countries shouldering the greatest burden are those least able to afford to do so. That is certainly the case in sub-Saharan Africa.

The refugee compact is ambitious and has the potential to make a life-changing difference to millions of refugees around the world. That will require a global effort, which needs to include robust accountability and indicators of progress to ensure that those commitments are translated into practice. As a Committee, we plan to hold the Government to account for the promises they have made, but we also recognise that the UK has an important part to play in pushing for robust accountability at an international level.

Funding, sadly, is woefully insufficient. The recommendations in our report simply cannot be achieved without plugging the gaps in funding to support displaced people. Based on evidence, we identified that the begging-bowl approach to raising international funds—crisis by crisis, annually or every other year—needs to be overhauled in line with the commitments made as part of the refugee compact, recognising that countries hosting refugees are providing a public good.

We also raised concerns that any new mechanism should not encourage low or middle-income host countries to take on yet more debt. Schemes such as the World Bank's IDA18 regional sub-window for refugees and host communities are getting money through to the countries that need it, which is welcome. However, much of that funding comes in the form of loans, rather than grants. In the context of increasing anxiety about a new African debt crisis, we question the appropriateness of an approach that makes those countries borrow to support refugees. We urge DFID to look again at how it can work with multilateral organisations such as the World Bank to reduce the financial burden that loans undoubtedly place on refugee-hosting countries.

Throughout our inquiry we sought to establish how far DFID is supporting people who have been forcibly displaced, which has not always been a straightforward task. Scrutiny of the Department's expenditure in that area is challenging because of the way the data is held and published. It has left us unable, for example, to determine the split in spending between support for refugees on one hand, and for IDPs on the other. In the Government's response, the Department says that its focus is

“on vulnerability rather than status”,

and therefore that

“we cannot necessarily break down that support based on the migratory status of recipients to determine what percentage of beneficiaries are refugees, IDPs,”

or

“members of a host community”.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on having secured the debate. What consideration has the International Development Committee given to displaced people of Christian faith across the whole of the middle east and Africa? I am ever mindful that 1.7 million Christians were displaced in Syria, 1.3 million were displaced in Iraq, and hundreds of thousands have been displaced in Nigeria. When it comes to looking at migrants and those who have been displaced, what particular consideration did the Committee give to those of Christian faith who have been persecuted and had to leave?

Stephen Twigg: The focus of this inquiry was east Africa, because we felt that it merited specific attention. However, in the previous Parliament our first report was on the Syrian refugee crisis, and one of the things that we highlighted was that Christians, and indeed some other minorities, faced particular challenges in the context of that crisis. The hon. Gentleman mentioned Nigeria; I will say something about north-east Nigeria in a moment, but he is absolutely right to say that Christians and a number of other minorities face particular challenges when it comes to displacement. It is very important that that is addressed, and I hope the Minister will feel able to respond to the important point that the hon. Gentleman has made.

I get it when DFID says it is determined that support should be based on vulnerability, but we need to be able to assess whether the funding being allocated is enough, particularly to reach the most marginalised internally displaced people. There are around 13 million such people, often living on the fringes of society in some of Africa's poorest, often conflict-afflicted countries, and the number is going up. In 2017 the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre recorded more than 8 million new displacements, with more than half of all new conflict displacement taking place in the region, including more than 2.2 million in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and almost 2 million in South Sudan. I have privately expressed real concern to the Minister—I put it on record today—about reports of what is happening now in north-east Nigeria. More than 825,000 people there are described as being beyond the reach of aid.

IDPs are some of the most vulnerable people in the world, yet they remain largely forgotten in these debates; they do not have the same protections under international law as refugees and they were not included in the refugee compact. Providing support to IDPs, whose care remains the responsibility of their own Governments, is a complex policy challenge. Christian Aid told us that “75% of IDPs do not live in camps, yet camps receive the majority of funding for IDPs.”

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): As my hon. Friend knows, I am very much involved with Sudan. We visited northern Darfur last year. One of the problems with the camps in such places is that they have become permanent settlements. That has resulted in conflict with the indigenous population, who do not want a camp on the edge of their town. There is a belief that these people will one day return, but in Darfur they are never going to return, given all the problems in Sudan at the moment. Does he agree that we need to look at the impact of forced urbanisation, because that will be a growing problem?

Stephen Twigg: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point. I will say something about Sudan a little later in my speech, but he is absolutely right to raise the specific context of Darfur. Similar challenges exist. I will say a bit more in a moment about some of the progressive policies that a number of African Governments, including the Ugandan Government, have pursued. Those tensions often do exist, and it is incredibly important that policies pursued support the host communities and the displaced communities. We have a good example of that with the approach taken in Jordan, but we need to learn lessons from that for other parts of the world, too.

DFID needs to support Governments in Africa to uphold the principles of the Kampala convention, which contains legal protections for IDPs, while encouraging other countries that have not yet signed up to do so.

I will say something about the particular vulnerabilities of women and girls who are refugees or internally displaced. Protection is a critical part of our response to forced displacement. It is important that DFID ensures that the highest standards are applied to safeguarding refugees through its own work and, critically, that of its partners, as well as ensuring that the right mechanisms are in place to support anyone who experiences or feels threatened by sexual abuse and exploitation. As we know, tragically that sometimes includes aid and health workers.

Putting women at the forefront of refugee responses is one way we feel as a Committee that protection could be improved. We took powerful evidence that suggested giving women a much more senior and prominent role in refugee response and humanitarian support for refugees could make a real difference in safeguarding some of the most vulnerable people.

We were alarmed by reports of cases of corruption, mismanagement and other harmful conduct at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. That came to light during this inquiry and during our previous inquiry into sexual exploitation and abuse. Where such cases arise, the UN must act urgently to put safeguards in place while it investigates to prevent disruption to life-saving operations. DFID, in turn, has a responsibility to react swiftly and proportionately to protect UK aid and, above all, to limit the impact on refugees who rely on the UN's services.

Despite those extremely serious cases, we found that overall UNHCR does an extraordinary job under incredibly difficult circumstances as the sole agency mandated to protect refugees around the world. Given that its work remains more important than ever, and its challenges greater than ever, its efforts to protect some of the most vulnerable people in the world need to be supported by the UK. We received good evidence that DFID is one of the most generous donors in the world in responding to emergency situations, and UNHCR thanked DFID for its support.

DFID is also a leader in supporting refugee education, and I welcome the commitment to prioritise the education of children in crises in the refreshed DFID education policy paper last year. Only half of refugees in low-income countries get even basic access to primary education, compared with a global figure of 90%. Since it was established in 2016, the Education Cannot Wait fund has helped provide education to hundreds of thousands of children and young people. The United Kingdom has been a strong supporter of Education Cannot Wait, and I warmly welcome the Minister's recent commitment

that we will increase our commitment to the fund in its forthcoming replenishment. She will not be surprised that I take another opportunity to urge the Government to make that pledge as soon as possible and to put a higher figure on their commitment. The earlier we make a pledge, as we have demonstrated this week with the Global Fund, the more likely it is that other donors will follow. That will ensure that this excellent fund can play its part to support education in emergencies.

Evidence to our inquiry showed the need for refugees to be integrated wherever possible into national education systems in host countries. I am pleased that the Department agreed with the recommendation that it should work with host Governments and communities wherever possible to facilitate that integration. I hope the Minister can say a bit more about how the Department will provide the technical and financial support needed to achieve that. Throughout our inquiry, we heard about the importance of enabling refugees to be self-reliant, including giving them the right to work and to move freely. Professor Alexander Betts told us:

“If refugees can be self-reliant and achieve autonomy it is better for them, their communities, the host societies, and indeed donor assistance.”

For obvious reasons, I realise that granting refugees unfettered rights to work is challenging for Governments in many parts of the world, but we were impressed by some of the progress we saw. Uganda has arguably the most progressive policy in the region and possibly the world in that regard. Since 2006, refugees living in Uganda have had freedom of movement, subject to some limited restrictions; employment rights; and equal access to services such as health and education. Refugees are granted a plot of land to cultivate. During our visit, Committee members saw at first hand the care and attention that refugees give to those plots of land.

This January, the Parliament of Ethiopia revised its existing refugee laws, making it easier for refugees to obtain work permits, live outside camps and access education. Central to that is the Ethiopian jobs compact, which seeks to create at least 100,000 jobs, including at least 30,000 for refugees. DFID has rightly invested heavily in the jobs compact. The Independent Commission for Aid Impact has been very positive in its assessment of the compact. If we want countries such as Uganda and Ethiopia to continue with policies that are progressive and, let us face it, potentially unpopular in their own countries, we must equip them with the resources and support they deserve.

The UK Government, however, need to look at what example this country is setting through our treatment of refugees and asylum seekers here. Evidence to our inquiry emphasised the importance of donors leading by example, including by allowing asylum seekers in the UK the right to work. We concluded that DFID cannot ask the poorest countries in the world to grant refugees the right to work while the UK Government significantly limits those rights here in our own country. It is extremely disappointing that the Government rejected our recommendation, and I urge them to reassess that policy. Little could carry more weight with our partner Governments in Africa than the UK practising what it preaches.

For the many refugees who cannot return home, integration into their country of asylum is often the most desirable means of rebuilding their lives. That

comes at a big financial, logistical and political cost for host countries. Our ability to advocate, as we do, for refugee integration in Africa is hampered by the United Kingdom's limited commitment to integrate refugees here in the UK through resettlement and asylum.

Lucy Hovil, chair of the International Refugee Rights Initiative, gave evidence to us. She said:

“At the end of the day, this is about political will. Who has the leverage to persuade Governments that are hosting enormous numbers of refugees to begin to offer local integration, without a similar level of commitment?”

Resettlement is a really important option for refugees who cannot return home. Yet at a time when more resettlement places are needed than ever, the number available is sharply in decline, largely because of the policies of the Trump Administration in the United States.

In 2017, the last year of figures, the UNHCR was able to submit only 75,000 refugees for resettlement—a 54% drop from the previous year. In this country, we have policies to be proud of in our resettlement of some of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees. However, we have been much less open to vulnerable refugees from sub-Saharan Africa, taking in just 448 in 2017-18. Providing those limited resettlement opportunities is a crucial part of the responsibility principle, which is at the heart of the refugee compact.

The UNHCR has said that it would like the UK to increase our total resettlement numbers to 10,000 places a year—almost double the current number. It is not a large number, particularly in contrast to the numbers taken by some of the poorest countries in the world. The Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees, George Okoth-Obbo, told us in evidence that that would both “help people and have an incredible demonstration effect.”

He said:

“The word I would use for that would be ‘tremendous’.”

It would show those countries hosting the lion's share of refugees that we in the UK are willing to shoulder some of that burden and provide people with alternative opportunities to rebuild their lives in the UK.

Jim Shannon: I fully agree with the hon. Gentleman. Does he recognise that within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland there are many communities who wish to help, including faith groups, Church groups and community groups? Such organisations could help the Government to do that.

Stephen Twigg: The hon. Gentleman is right. It is for the Government to decide on the numbers, but there is an enthusiasm and commitment in constituencies including his and mine and, I am sure, those of Members across the House, among faith communities, other communities and local authorities. I know that because when Syrian refugees came to Liverpool there was real enthusiasm and positivity. Although 10,000 would be a really significant contribution, it is not a large number of people; it is 30 refugees for each constituency. That is not a large number, and the hon. Gentleman is right to make the point that there would be a moral purpose to which faith communities and others would absolutely sign up.

The Committee, which is cross-party, endorsed the UNHCR's call to increase resettlement places to 10,000, and we added the rider that we felt that at least a

[Stephen Twigg]

quarter of those places should be for refugees from sub-Saharan Africa. We were disappointed but, if I am honest, not surprised that the Home Office, and the Government collectively, rejected that recommendation. The progress that the UK has made with the Syrian vulnerable persons and vulnerable children resettlement schemes shows the capacity to scale up resettlement schemes quickly if the political will is there. Given the severity and urgency of the refugee crisis in Africa, a similar response is required. I hope that the Government will reconsider our recommendation.

I will finish by talking about some broader issues. We were very worried that the Government's approach to forced displacement is too influenced by the desire to control the number of people coming to Europe. Migration is, perfectly understandably, central to the UK's strategies on aid and on national security and defence. Both those strategies focus heavily on refugees and migrants travelling to Europe and the implications of that for the UK.

We received evidence expressing concern that the focus on Europe risked detracting from tackling the root causes of displacement—hence “Anchors not walls”. Action Aid said:

“The emphasis on preventing the movement of refugees towards Europe is short-sighted, unlikely to address the symptoms of deep-rooted power imbalances, structural inequalities or underlying drivers of conflict and climate change”.

There is real concern, for example, about the European Union emergency trust fund for Africa, to which the UK contributes both directly and through our contributions to the EU budget and the European development fund. Care International told us:

“EU Trust Funds...were not established with a vision to reduce poverty or meet humanitarian needs or human rights, but to stem migration flows to the EU.”

Programmes funded by UK aid should surely be driven first and foremost by the objective of protecting people on the ground, many of whom are the most vulnerable people in the world. That should surely be reflected in all our work in this area.

We also heard widespread unease about the human rights implications of some of the UK Government's work on irregular migration, particularly with regard to Libya and the Khartoum process. The 2017 report of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact cited significant concerns about the potential for the UK's support to the Libyan coastguard to breach the “do no harm” principle. There are serious concerns that the programmes are returning vulnerable migrants and refugees to Libyan detention centres, where Amnesty International have told us that migrants and refugees are

“routinely exposed to torture, extortion and rape.”

ICAI's follow-up report said that

“DFID has taken action to strengthen analysis and risk management”, but noted that

“the cross-government Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) has more to do in this area.”

The UK's involvement remains a cause for apprehension. As a Committee, we are very worried that policies pursued by some parts of the UK Government risk conflicting with others. There is a pressing need for a more joined-up approach to migration across Government.

We concluded that the Government need to take a comprehensive look at all their policies on migration and displacement. We called for a national strategy to bring much-needed clarity and transparency, to consolidate the work that DFID is doing with that of other Government Departments to identify and resolve areas of conflict, facilitate better cross-Government working and create a coherent narrative that should reflect the UK's position as a progressive voice in the debate on displacement and migration.

Dr Drew: By chance we visited the Khartoum process in Khartoum, and we were struck that it was nothing to do with Sudan, because they were mainly Ethiopians and Eritreans. I was not sure on what basis those people would be persuaded to go back. It would be useful to know the current status of the Khartoum process, given the state Khartoum is in. Is it an extant programme, or has it stopped?

Stephen Twigg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I think the answer is that it is still an ongoing process, but perhaps the Minister can give us a definitive response.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): All our migration programmes in Sudan have been suspended in the light of the current political and security situation. We are working with partners including the EU to ensure that all programmes in which the UK has a stake are also suspended. The regional operational centre in Khartoum has been temporarily relocated to Nairobi.

Stephen Twigg: I thank the Minister.

I am conscious of time, so I will draw my remarks to a close. We were disappointed that the Government rejected the recommendation for a coherent cross-Government national UK strategy on displacement and migration. I welcome the fact that the Department has responded positively and has agreed in whole or in part with 31 of the 34 recommendations that directly apply to it, but unless the Government as a whole address the inconsistencies in the policies of different Departments, we are at risk of failing some of the most vulnerable people in the world. It is time for the Government as a whole to practise here in the UK what we preach on the global stage.

2 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Evans.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) for securing this timely debate and for all the work that he and the International Development Committee do to scrutinise the work of the Department. The Committee's extremely important report, “Anchors not Walls”, shines a light on the lives of some of the most vulnerable and marginalised people in the world. I was pleased to see the focus on education, which not only is a right but can help to protect girls from forms of exploitation such as trafficking and child marriage—highly pertinent threats for teenage girls in the region.

Like many hon. Members, I remain distraught by the number of people forcibly displaced. One person or family displaced is tragic, but 20 million is horrendous

and intolerable. I feel passionately about the subject as a British-born Nigerian and as a representative of Edmonton, which is a special, vibrant and multicultural place. Many of my constituents come from countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Jamaica, Somalia, Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Turkey, Yemen, Uganda or Cyprus—to name just a few. I have not named them all; please do not be offended. Most have ties to countries affected by high levels of displacement.

There are more than 1 million refugees in Uganda, in one of the most progressive arrangements on the planet. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, said:

“Given the record numbers of people needing safety from war, conflict and persecution and the lack of political solutions to these situations, we urgently need countries to come forward and resettle more refugees”.

CARE International’s report, “Suffering in Silence”, profiled the 10 most under-reported crises around the world, which are due to climate change, conflict and war. They are in North Korea, Eritrea, Burundi, Sudan, DRC, Mali, Vietnam, the Lake Chad basin, the Central African Republic and Peru. They have gone on for far too long and it is the poorest and most marginalised civilians who pay the price.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Nigeria, I strongly support the Committee’s report, particularly its assessment that humanitarian crises in Africa are often overlooked. I want to highlight in particular the hidden crisis unfolding in the Lake Chad basin. One of the most severe humanitarian emergencies in the world, it has displaced more than 2.2 million people, half of whom are children. More than 10.8 million people across Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger need humanitarian assistance. At times, the crisis seems intractable.

The scourge of violence in Nigeria is under-reported and, sadly, not acted on earnestly by the Federal Government of Nigeria. The crisis in the Lake Chad basin is in its 10th year. Escalating violence, including deliberate targeted attacks on civilians, has characterised the conflict, hindered humanitarian access and rendered any long-term development impossible. Long years of conflict with Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa have perpetuated the humanitarian crisis throughout the four countries of the Lake Chad basin, but the roots of the crisis are long-standing. It is the product of widespread inequality, political marginalisation and competition for scarce resources, particularly water, and other developmental challenges, which have contributed to its severity and complexity.

Boko Haram’s violent conflict, which broke out 10 years ago in north-east Nigeria, has involved a horrific campaign of attacks on civilians and mass abductions—we all remember the Chibok girls. All too often, the words of adolescent girls in fragile and conflict-affected areas go unheard because, unfortunately, politicians and policy makers fail to listen to them. Today, I want to share the words of Kwanye, a 16-year-old girl living in the Lake Chad basin. She said:

“I could not continue my education because girls were being kidnapped from my school. Everyone wanted me to get married but I refused because I wanted to go to school. I had good grades, friends and was happy at school before the crisis. I always thought education would give me a better life. But one night, everything changed. I lost my parents, uncles and siblings in the crisis. I constantly read my old books so that I don’t forget. I can’t go to school when I can barely afford to eat.”

Kwanye’s words are truly harrowing, but that is the situation not just for one girl or for a handful of girls; right now, around the world, 39 million girls like Kwanye have had their education disrupted as a direct result of a humanitarian crisis.

Equally worrying, recent Plan International UK research found that 13 million girls are completely out of school because of conflict, disaster and long-term displacement. The region around the Lake Chad basin is the worst place on earth to be a girl seeking 12 years of quality education. A girl in Niger is 20 times more likely to be a teenage mother than to finish secondary school. The killings and destruction have spread into four countries—Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. Increasingly, host communities take in as many displaced civilians as possible, but most host families are poor and fear the repercussions of the now-developed violent confrontation engaged in by Boko Haram and the region’s security forces.

In February 2017, the countries of the Lake Chad region—Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria—donor governments such as Norway, Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom, and international organisations gathered for the Oslo humanitarian conference on Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, at which \$672 million in financial support was pledged for 2017 and beyond. The humanitarian response in the Lake Chad region was scaled up significantly as a result: more than 6 million people were reached with assistance in 2017 and a famine was averted in north-east Nigeria.

In September 2018, a high-level conference on the region was held in Germany, which built on the achievements, partnerships and commitments of the Oslo conference. It focused on three thematic pillars: humanitarian assistance and protection, crisis prevention and stabilisation, and building resilience for sustainable development. I ask the Minister to explain how the Department plans to mobilise resources to meet the immediate and longer-term needs of those affected by the crisis, particularly the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, in 2018, 541,000 new displacements were recorded in Nigeria; 200,000 of them occurred in the middle-belt region and the rest were due to Boko Haram. Almost one in three women report having experienced sexual violence committed by members of Boko Haram, the security forces or the armed forces during the conflict. Violence against men and boys is also prevalent, with many killed, detained or recruited, or otherwise unaccounted for.

The Nigerian Government urgently need to propose action to ensure that security operations identify better ways of distinguishing between combatants and civilians. They must also investigate and challenge abuses and exploitation by authorities, and take concrete steps to ensure that fundamental human rights are respected. When there is evidence that human rights have been violated, those cases must be sent to the International Criminal Court. I ask the Minister, what assistance is the UK offering the Nigerian Government via non-governmental organisations to ensure that all the evidence is being securely collated and documented?

In February, the African Union declared 2019 the year of refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons, so this is the year for us to be proactive, and I urge all UK parliamentarians to act. Will the Minister explain what DFID’s long-term plan is for managing migration and forced displacement sustainably and fairly

[*Kate Osamor*]

through the global compact for migration and the global compact for refugees? The UK's humanitarian work cannot and must not depend only on the ebb and flow of pity and shock. Today, more than ever before, we need international solidarity and respect for international laws and norms. We already have the universal declaration of human rights, which is more than 70 years old, the 1951 refugee convention, and the sustainable development goals.

I ask the Minister to use this opportunity to say that the UK will put refugees at the heart of its foreign policy and uphold human rights around the world. It is imperative that the UK reinforces a collective, multifaceted approach to addressing the crisis and its root causes. I end with the words of Kofi Annan:

"Internal displacement is the great tragedy of our time. The internally displaced people are among the most vulnerable of the human family."

2.12 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you for chairing this debate, Mr Evans. I congratulate all those who created this report: the Select Committee members, the staff team, and all those who contributed evidence and shared their experience. I think it is an excellent report that is full of detail and has great recommendations. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) made an excellent opening speech, which really did the report justice.

The global refugee compact states:

"Countries that receive and host refugees, often for extended periods, make an immense contribution from their own limited resources to the collective good, and indeed to the cause of humanity."

The SNP will continue to be an advocate for the most vulnerable. We call on the UK Government to do more. The UK Government have been slow in filling the 480 places they promised for unaccompanied children; only 220 of those places have been filled so far, which means there are 260 unaccompanied children alone out there who could be helped today by the UK Government. It is imperative that they fulfil their commitment—I would prefer it to be more—and ensure that those 260 children are helped.

Education is a long-term challenge, and is easily disrupted by outside events. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) recently led a debate in this Chamber on education for the most vulnerable and marginalised people. The "Send my friend to school" campaign brings to the ears of children in these nations the issues that are faced by those who cannot attend school and do not have access to a good education system. It is amusing because, when we speak to young children in our constituencies, not all of them are all that enthusiastic about going to school, but they really see the benefits of it and believe that everybody should have a right to education. It is great to meet so many young people who are incredibly passionate about ensuring that everybody receives an education. Imagine not being able to learn. Imagine the impact on individuals and communities if children are not able to learn. It is unimaginable that we would allow that for our own children, so we should do everything we can to ensure that children across the world have access to education.

Samara McIntyre, a teacher in Aberdeen, has done everything she can to teach young people in Kittybrewster Primary School about access to education and refugees more widely. When I was brought in to speak to her class, I was given the most intense grilling I have ever received. Those young people were so passionate and they could not believe that we are not doing more. They were absolutely sure that there was more that could be done. They sat me down and said, "You need to do more. What are you going to do?" I am standing here today asking the UK Government to do more.

I want to highlight a few of the things we have been doing in Scotland, particularly on education. The Scottish Government have helped 73,000 Malawian children to stay in school by supporting a feeding programme, and our Pakistan scholarship scheme has helped to support more than 400 women and 1,400 school children to continue their education. We have also started the Livingstone fellowship scheme, which allows doctors from Zambia and Malawi to come to Scotland for specialist training. They take that back to their countries and use their knowledge.

Recommendation 14 in the report is about women and women's empowerment. I believe that we will not empower women unless we educate them and ensure that they have access to appropriate healthcare and contraceptive choices, so that they can make the choice about what they do with their bodies. Where they desire it, they can choose not to have children and so can escape that poverty trap. That is incredibly important. That is even more vital in post-conflict zones, where there are often a huge number of internally displaced people, and access to medical facilities can be incredibly patchy. Contraception is perhaps not the first thing that people think of when providing medical aid, but it is greatly important for the empowerment and support of women.

I want to flag up an issue that I discovered in a UK Government Home Office paper on trafficked women from Nigeria. It says:

"Trafficked women who return from Europe, wealthy from prostitution"—

wealthy from prostitution!—

"enjoy high social-economic status and in general are not subject to negative social attitudes on return."

I raised that issue a couple of weeks ago with a Home Office Minister in the Chamber, and the document is still online and has not been changed. I am hugely concerned about that use of language. The hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) also mentioned it in the Chamber this week. It needs to be changed, because the UK Government should not have that view of women who have been trafficked and used in prostitution.

On the SNP's support for women, the UN special envoy to Syria invited our First Minister to provide support and training to female peacemakers in negotiation and communication skills. The Scottish Government and the SNP will continue to do all we can to empower women and help them to rebuild their communities.

The report says that the UK must practise what it preaches. We agree that the UK should commit to taking 10,000 people per year after 2020. That represents a meaningful but, we believe, realistic increase over the current commitment. We are playing our part in Scotland—these are not hollow words—and we commit

to continuing to do so. We have already taken almost 20% of the Syrian refugees, despite the fact that Scotland has less than 10% of the UK population. We are doing what we can, and we promise to continue doing so, but we need the UK Government to make commitments on that.

On the UK practising what it preaches, the point has been made eloquently that the UK should allow asylum seekers to work. A study from 2016 showed that if 25% of asylum seekers switched to self-sufficiency through work, it would save the equivalent of £46 million in 2017-18 prices. It would not just save money; it would ensure that people are better integrated into our society. It would reduce some of the negative social stigma from other people who are not refugees looking on and saying, "This person is an asylum seeker. They are not working; they are just living on Government handouts," when many of them are highly trained and really want to work.

We can do more, we should do more and we must do more. We are talking about the most vulnerable people on the planet. Who are we if we do not do everything we can to support them?

2.19 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Evans. Let me start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) not only for securing the debate, but for the hard work that he did, along with his staff and colleagues on the International Development Committee—let me curry some early favour by acknowledging that that includes you, Mr Evans—to produce this report on forced displacement in Africa and to hold the Government to account on one of the most important crises of our time.

I want to reflect on a few things that my hon. Friend said, because they bear repeating. He mentioned that forced displacement affects a wide range of people—the internally displaced, people in camps and people outside the country but not in camps—but the one thing they have in common is that they are vulnerable. In our drive, as he characterised it, to achieve the sustainable development goals, we will leave those people behind if we do not act to support them and help them rebuild their lives. We must acknowledge every time we have this conversation that displacement happens into the poorest countries. My hon. Friend made the point well that those countries provide an exceptional public good, but those who shoulder the greatest burden are those who are the least able to do so.

I will return to the "begging bowl" approach, but while I am reflecting on what my hon. Friend said, let me mention that I was visited yesterday by a senior colleague in a major aid organisation for a private briefing on Yemen. We talked about Yemen but, as often happens nowadays, we got on to the climate emergency. He rightly said that the climate emergency has already reached the countries we are talking about—certainly those with the very least—so the idea that we have to wait for something to happen and then run around desperately trying to get the funding to tackle it is a nonsense. Regrettably—we really should regret and reflect on this—this is the new normal, so there is no need to wait for it to happen before we act.

Everyone who spoke mentioned the role of women. My colleagues in the shadow international development team, the Leader of the Opposition and I received a delegation of Syrian women politicians, who told us about their experiences. They said in particular that they felt constantly, from the beginning to where they are today, that their roles were gendered for them. In conflict, on the road to reconstruction and everywhere in the middle, women's roles are gendered for them: they must be peacemakers and care givers, but not leaders. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby made a very strong case for the benefit we would get from female leadership in such situations. I hope the Minister heard that and reflects on it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) started her speech by referring to education. When we think about humanitarian crises and displacement, we think about meeting immediate needs—ensuring that people have shelter and that their healthcare and nutrition needs are met—but education is an exceptional form of immunisation in itself. That is why we want everyone in our communities to have access to it. That was really brought to life by my hon. Friend's example from Niger: a girl is 20 times more likely to be a teenage mother than to finish school. That really is quite something.

My hon. Friend also made a really important point about the 10 years of experience in the Lake Chad basin, where 2.2 million people have been displaced, half of them children. Incidents such as the Boko Haram abduction become massive global stories but then go away. Although Kwanye was not an abductee, her story—one of lost education and lost opportunities—is just as stark and important. I do not think I can put it better than my hon. Friend did when she said that these people need solidarity, not pity and shock. That is really important as we reflect on how we engage on an ongoing basis. Our pity and shock can be useful at times, but an ongoing, consistent, bankable, reliable sense of solidarity would be a much stronger approach.

The numbers on forced displacement are staggering. Last year, a person was displaced every two seconds, and 68.5 million people have been forced to flee their homes: for every one of us living in our beautiful country, there is a person on the move, without a home of their own. We know that those millions of people fleeing conflict face poverty, persecution and other forms of insecurity. They face incredibly perilous journeys: they can be exploited, raped or attacked on the way, just seeking safety. The majority of them are prevented from getting to a safe point where they can start a new life. Instead, they tend to get stuck in so-called gateway countries such as Libya, where they are locked up and blocked from reaching their safe final destination.

Many of the people who are trapped in a third country, unable to return home or to start a new life somewhere new, face a bleak future. Last week—this sort of thing brings it home—I met campaigners from Western Sahara, who talked about the 50,000 Sahrawi people who fled Moroccan forces in 1975. The majority ended up in refugee camps in the Tindouf province of Algeria. There are now 90,000 people in those camps, many of whom are the original 50,000. That was 45 years ago. I have been walking this planet for 35 years, so they have been there, stuck in stasis, for 10 years longer than I have been around. Time has moved on for the rest of the world—imagine the changes between 1975 and 2019:

[Alex Norris]

the world is a completely different place—but not for them. For them, time has stood still. They have spent whole lifetimes without enough food, water, healthcare, housing or education—the things we build our lives on.

As we know, that experience is not restricted to Western Sahara. There are far too many displaced people living a life in limbo in camps across Africa—in Kenya, Uganda, Libya and Tanzania—and beyond, in Jordan, Bangladesh and Lebanon. If we do not act, that will be the future: decades-long stays in camps for millions of people on the move. That is a real stain on our conscience.

The report does so much to keep the light shining on this issue. I am grateful that the Government agreed with many of the Committee's recommendations—that really ought to be reflected in this discussion—but I want to draw attention to three points. First, no one can do this alone. The global compact on refugees was a huge step towards international co-operation, but if Governments on the frontline of the displacement crisis are to meet their obligations, they need the money to do it.

That brings me back to what the Committee called the “begging bowl” approach, in which Governments have to ask for more every time to help them meet a new challenge. Will the Minister consider again the Committee's recommendation to set up, with our international partners, new grants and funding mechanisms that would enable long-term, sustainable financing of international responses—again, solidarity rather than shock? Can she tell us any more about how the Government intend to approach the global refugee forum in December and the mooted UN high-level panel on internal displacement to keep up the momentum towards international solutions?

Secondly, DFID can and ought to keep raising the technical standards on international refugee responses. The UK has real influence in the UNHCR, which is a good thing, and we should continue to drive organisational reform there. Refugees must be able to get better information about what is happening in the homes they fled, especially in terms of safety, before they decide whether to go back. When voluntary return is not possible, refugees ought to be offered routes to integrate locally rather than staying indefinitely detained and excluded. I hope the Minister will commit to learning quickly some of the lessons—good and bad—from Jordan, Ethiopia and Bangladesh on voluntary returns and local integration, and to doing more in those areas.

Thirdly, I want to touch on what my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby and the Committee characterised as the “practise what we preach” approach, which is about honouring our own obligations here in the UK. The Committee made clear, reasonable and powerful recommendations, for which we heard support in the debate, in particular about easing the restrictions on asylum seekers' right to work in the UK. Prior to taking up this role, I was on the Select Committee on Home Affairs, and that is something we recommended. We should also increase resettlement numbers to 10,000 annually, as recommended by the UNHCR, with a quarter of those places reserved for refugees from sub-Saharan Africa; and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton mentioned, put in place a coherent cross-Government strategy.

There is pressure on global north democracies to try to keep the migration crisis away—out of sight and out of mind—because it is politically difficult. It was politically difficult for generations of colleagues before us. I hope that perhaps in my generation we might get towards having a proper, sensible and honest conversation with our voters about it.

The sticking-plaster approaches of trying to incentivise potential migrants to stay at home or funding coastguards to shut down the Mediterranean will not work. There are those who would push us towards hoping that other countries will do it, without us doing so ourselves, but that will not work. When other countries pander to the far right, we see what that means: people drowning in the Mediterranean; the captain of Sea-Watch 3, Carola Rackete, arrested in Lampedusa because her crew put saving lives before politics; choosing to build walls and put children in cages; and allowing others to drown in the Rio Grande.

We would all reflect on those things and say, “Never here,” but we must understand that no one gets there in one leap. It starts with “Go home” immigration vans, with locking up people who have done nothing but be migrants to this country, and with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender migrants being sent home to face persecution. If we go on that journey, we lose our claim to be part of the solution and become part of the problem. That is what the Government and Parliament must consider: what side of history will we be on? Will we be part of the solution, or will we contribute to the problem?

I look forward to the Minister's response. I again thank hon. Members for their contributions, and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby for securing the debate.

2.31 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, particularly as you are a member of the International Development Committee. I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) on securing the debate and thank his Committee, through him, for having written a very good report on an issue that is too often overlooked. The report has shone a strong spotlight on it. The debate allowed us to raise some issues considered in the report and to cover the Government's response. I was glad that we were able to fully accept 22 of the report's 34 recommendations and partially accept a further nine. In fact, we disagreed with only three, two of which were for the Home Office, while one was a cross-Government matter. I will try to respond to the range of points made in this wide-ranging debate.

The Government fully recognise the scale of the issue, and I hope in my remarks to outline what we are doing not only in our country but, in terms of my responsibilities, across Africa. As I said when I gave evidence to the Committee, we take a needs-based approach to humanitarian issues, so the difference between refugees and internally displaced people is not one that we formally recognise. Legally, of course, there is a difference when we are evaluating the need, so we stand ready to help both internally displaced people and refugees, as I hope I made clear to the Committee.

The point about sexual exploitation was well made. I reassure hon. Members, as I did earlier this week, that in the light of the allegations made in *The Times* last

week, we have checked and ensured that that was not a DFID-funded programme. However, as that example highlights, there can be no let-up in our work to ensure that the highest standards are maintained by the industry and that we get commitments from all our suppliers.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby keeps tempting me on Education Cannot Wait. I am particularly tempted because I do not know whether I will be able to go to the UN General Assembly later this year—I hope I will. He knows that I share the enthusiasm of the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for the “Send my friend to school” campaign, which connects young people with the right of young people all around the world to go to school. No one could be more committed than I am to the cause of education in emergencies, education for girls and the power of education to make the world a better place in the 21st century. We have announced that we will continue to be one of the leading donors to Education Cannot Wait. As the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby will know, the amount is not yet finalised or announced.

The hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) also raised the importance of education and girls’ education. Not everyone knows that Boko Haram basically translates to “Western education is evil”, which shows how it is feared and how powerful education is for the cultural reasons that she outlined, as well as for the economic impact it can have. Every year someone spends in school adds 10% to their lifetime earnings.

I assure the hon. Lady that we are doing everything we can to encourage the newly re-elected Nigerian Government to tackle the challenges in north-east Nigeria. It was tempting for them to say in the run-up to the election, “Look, we’ve solved the problem. Everything’s okay.” We all recognise that it is not okay. Our North East Nigeria to Transition to Development programme is our top programme in Nigeria and is worth £85.9 million. I assure her that the problems around the Lake Chad basin are at the forefront of our agenda.

The hon. Lady will know that near Rann, many refugees were chased over the border into northern Cameroon and that there was a process of refoulement to take them back to Nigeria. We were able to intervene with the Cameroonian Government to say, “That is not how you treat refugees.”

That brings me to how refugees are treated. Everyone cited the great example of Uganda, which is exemplary. I want to say for the record, though, that in the UK refugees can work from day one. It is important to make the distinction, however, between refugees and those who seek asylum, which is a route often used by people who come as economic migrants. I hope we can all agree that irregular migration, where people risk their lives and those of their families crossing the Mediterranean, doing incredibly dangerous things and putting themselves in the hands of people smugglers, is not something that we can encourage or incentivise. Global compacts are valuable in outlining our desire to regularise such paths, and asylum seeking is clearly an area where there can be and has been abuse. That is why we are careful that, only once 12 months of delay has occurred—through no fault of the person claiming asylum—can they then work in shortage occupations. The Home Secretary has committed to keep that area under review, but I want to make that distinction because I do not think the general public always understand it.

I hope the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby saw the announcement we made on World Refugee day about our approach post 2020, when we will merge all schemes into a single scheme, which will enable us in the first year to offer 5,000 places to refugees. He will be aware that that number is an increase and that the numbers of people coming in under the schemes are ahead of the commitments we have made. I will give Members an update.

In terms of the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, the most recent data shows that, against our commitment of 20,000 by 2020, we will be at nearly 16,000 by the end of the first quarter. The gateway protection scheme is for 750 people a year. As of March, 9,427 people have come under that scheme, including 762 this year. The mandate scheme has no specific annual commitment, but as of March 2019, 423 people had been resettled. Some 1,410 have been resettled under the vulnerable children’s settlement scheme, against a commitment of up to 3,000 by 2020, including 687 in the year to March 2019. In total that is 23,000, plus about 750 per financial year. It is important to note that we very much welcome community sponsorship schemes, and the numbers for those can be counted in addition.

I mentioned the latest on Sudan in my earlier intervention, and it was important to get that on the record. Libya was also raised.

Stephen Twigg: I welcome what has been said about resettlement. Can I ask her, as the Minister for Africa, to liaise between the Foreign Office and the Home Office to look at the options for refugees from sub-Saharan Africa, particularly those with vulnerabilities? One of the strengths of the Syrian scheme was that it recognised that there are certain minorities, for example disabled people, who particularly benefit from the chance to come here. Could we look at something similar for sub-Saharan Africa?

Harriett Baldwin: I know that the hon. Gentleman’s recommendation was for a specific quota. From 2020 onwards, rather than focusing on a particular country, that is widened to one global scheme, without specific target numbers for particular areas. That widens things geographically and addresses some of what he is looking for.

On Libya, at the United Nations Security Council yesterday, we tried to get condemnation for the attack on the detention centre, as Members will have seen. I want to say for the record that neither the UK Government nor the European Union fund Libyan detention centres—there is sometimes the allegation that we do. We fund humanitarian programmes, and with humanitarian programmes, the principle of doing no harm is observed. I want to reassure Members that we properly apply risk assessment mitigation and monitoring to all the programming in Libya.

On the debt versus grant point, the vast majority of what we do is through grants, so we do a lot of grant funding. The World Bank programme is additional. It is debt-financing and it is extremely concessional, but it is a welcome additional layer of support, coming on top of the grant funding that we already do.

I pay tribute to the wonderful Scotland-Malawi partnership. It was great to hear about the specific work to help girls to stay in school. When I was in Malawi, I

[*Harriett Baldwin*]

met some of the young women who walk miles every day to go to school, and miles again at the end of the day, who were thoroughly enjoying being able to stay in school for so much longer. I will take back the point that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North raised about the wording on women returning “wealthy from prostitution” on Government websites. I will look into that and see if we can get it erased.

The hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) spoke of how climate change is exacerbating the situation. It is doing so in the Lake Chad basin, which has been dramatically reduced. It is clearly exacerbating the movement between herders and pastoralists in central Nigeria, which has been an area of terrible conflict, and other things across the whole of the Sahel—Darfur was also mentioned. That is why we are stepping up what we are doing not only on climate, but also in the Sahel. There is more that we can do on the use of things we have invented, such as more drought-resistant millet, and there are different interventions with trees that can make a difference. There is always scope for us to scale up what we are doing to tackle these issues.

The Grand Bargain was mentioned. We have committed to do more through medium-term funding and funding that is not earmarked for specific projects, and that is meeting our side of the Grand Bargain.

I cannot say who is going to go in December, but there will be good UK representation. I have also noted down voluntary returns—the UK position will always be that all returns for refugees should be voluntary.

I think I have touched on all the recommendations and on the cases where we did not agree with the recommendations. I hope I have clarified the position on refugees having immediate access to the labour market in the UK, I hope I have highlighted the offer that we have made for the post-2020 refugee resettlement offer, which is an increase, and I hope that we can all agree, as politicians, that this is about balance. Were we to do what the German Chancellor did a few years ago, I think that might very well undermine the welcome that refugees across the UK get as part of this resettlement scheme. There is certainly a really strong welcome across my constituency, and I hope that is the same in other hon. Members’ constituencies. It is about balance and also not creating incentives for people to risk their lives through irregular migration routes.

The overarching strategic framework, which hon. Members asked about, is obviously the sustainable development goals. It is about peace and making sure that we work to resolve conflict. It is about people and making sure that their human capital is developed. It is about making sure that we save our planet. It is about making sure that we work in partnership with all the organisations mentioned, including Education Cannot Wait—I give a shout-out to the global fund for education in emergencies, which is hosted by UNICEF, as we often fund through that as well. It is about prosperity and making sure that the progress that the world has made on reducing extreme poverty continues into the future.

I assure hon. Members that these are important issues that are at the heart of the Department for International Development’s work. Through the global compact for migration and the global compact on refugees, we have

a global framework to work together on; it is cohesive and forms a good, forward-leaning framework. The UK can be very proud of what we are doing. We do more than just practise what we preach; we also help others and we can all be very proud of that.

I conclude by thanking the Select Committee for its report; we will get on with implementing the recommendations we accept.

2.46 pm

Stephen Twigg: I thank the Minister and everyone who participated in the debate. Let me respond briefly on three points. The first is education, which I think everyone has spoken about. I absolutely echo what the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) said about “Send my friend”, a brilliant campaign that has brought the issue of access to education to the fore of debate in this place, as well as among the wider public.

On resettlement, I need to correct my earlier mental arithmetic. I said that 10,000 divided by 650 was 30, but of course it is not; it is 15—I doubled the figure. So it would only be 15 refugees per constituency, not 30. I welcome what the Minister said. The announcement on World Refugee Day came after the publication of our report. That announcement is progress. I particularly welcome what she said in response to my intervention, because it gives some hope that refugees from sub-Saharan Africa might get a larger proportion of those resettlement places in future. I still encourage us to be a bit more generous and get to the 10,000 figure that UNHCR has recommended. The Minister is right to say that it is a question of balance, but 10,000 is still a very modest number when compared with the numbers coming into countries such as Uganda and Ethiopia.

The focus of our report was east Africa, but we have had a number of contributions—not least from my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor)—on what is happening in the Lake Chad basin and north-east Nigeria. There is clearly a challenging set of issues, which I know the Minister is focused on because we have spoken about it. I hope there might be an opportunity on a future occasion, either in Westminster Hall or the main Chamber, to look in more detail at the Government’s strategy on the Sahel, the Lake Chad basin and Nigeria, because there is a huge challenge there. I was very struck by the figure—I think it is from the UN—of 825,000 people in north-east Nigeria who are beyond the reach of aid; the aid organisations cannot even get to them. I hope that is something we can return to. I thank all Members—including you, Mr Evans, for your chairmanship.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Thank you. It has been a superb debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Tenth Report of the International Development Committee, *Forced displacement in Africa: Anchors not walls*, HC 1433, and the Government response, HC 2357.

2.49 pm

Sitting suspended.

Tier 5 Religious Worker Visas

[MIKE GAPES *in the Chair*]

3 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered changes to Tier 5 Religious Worker Visas.

It is, as always, an immense pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Gapes. I thank colleagues on the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this debate; it is greatly appreciated. I also pay tribute to my co-sponsors, my friends the hon. Members for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) and for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen). I have always believed that our politics is better when we work cross-party to tackle injustices, so I am particularly grateful to them for joining together on this occasion.

More than 70 right hon. and hon. Members expressed support for this Backbench Business debate, and I know from conversations with colleagues across parties that the changes introduced by the British Government have caused great consternation in constituencies and parishes all across these islands. For example, my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), who cannot be here today, has been inundated with correspondence from more than 120 constituents in three Catholic parishes because they are particularly concerned about the changes. Likewise, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) wanted to put his opposition on the record, but for diary reasons he cannot make it to the debate.

This is an opportunity to air those concerns with the Minister, who I know will listen attentively before responding. Before I go any further, I express my sincere thanks to Anthony Horan from the Catholic Parliamentary Office in Edinburgh and to the Bishops' Conference for an excellent briefing in advance of the debate. We have only 90 minutes and I want to ensure that all colleagues get a good opportunity to air their views, so I will confine my speech to around 10 minutes, but I will of course be happy for colleagues to intervene.

Concerns about changes to religious worker visas were first raised with me by my good friend Father Liam McMahon, the parish priest at St Michael's in Parkhead. Essentially, at the tail end of last year the British Government introduced a change in regulations that meant that visiting clergy could no longer enter the UK via the tier 5 visa route and would instead have to apply via tier 2. The changes, which came into force on 10 January, are causing something of a headache for a whole host of religious organisations, but particularly the Catholic Church, which requires visiting clergy to cover for periods of illness, holidays, religious retreats and even for priests who are away on pilgrimage with their parishioners.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his speech—I am sorry that I cannot stay for the whole debate. He is right that the changes affect all faiths and denominations, including the local gurdwara in my constituency. In the Sikh community, there is a pattern of bringing priests over for short periods each year, which enriches their faith, and enables them to share ideas and philosophies and to train each other. That is inhibited by the rule changes.

David Linden: The hon. Lady is right to put on the record the concerns of her local gurdwara, and I am glad that she has been able to represent it.

I mentioned some of the reasons why those in the clergy might be required to be away from the parish. It is not unusual and is perhaps best demonstrated in the situation of my own church, Parkhead Nazarene, where our senior pastor, Ian Wills, is currently away on a three-month sabbatical. We are blessed to have a wider pastoral staff team—Shelley, Dave and John are keeping things ticking over—but sadly that luxury is unavailable to other congregations or denominations.

Catholic parishes and dioceses regularly used the tier 5 religious worker visa route for priests to come to the UK on supply placements. That is important because a supply placement priest would typically lead the celebration of holy mass, including the celebration of the sacrament of marriage. He would also lead funerals, including the support of bereaved family members, and would routinely visit sick and elderly members of the local community. It is important that the Minister realises that those tasks do not simply stop when the existing parish priest falls ill or goes for a well-earned holiday or religious retreat.

Surely we would all agree that, in an age when social isolation and loneliness are increasing, the church is so often the place where people can gather as a community, to support each other and engage in friendship. The church is not only a place of worship, but a hub for the local community, providing both spiritual and practical support to the sick, the elderly and the vulnerable. Parishes may host tea and coffee mornings, cafés, youth clubs, pensioner clubs, soup kitchens, food banks and toddler groups. They provide a safe space for counselling and addiction meetings—Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, for example—as well as financial support for struggling individuals and families, especially through voluntary groups such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul.

Clearly, without the support of visiting priests, Catholic parishes will simply be unable to provide the present level of service to the local community, and that would be a crying shame. The Bishops' Conference is crystal clear that much of the positive work in and around Catholic parishes, which engender a great sense of community, is seriously compromised by the changes to the immigration rules. My colleagues will elaborate on that point. The new arrangements more than double the cost incurred by parishes, making supply cover effectively unaffordable. Basically, the cost of applications will go from £244 to £610, which nets an extra £366 per application for the Home Office.

The tier 2 minister of religion visa route also imposes strict language requirements. I saw in the press this morning that the Home Office is putting a lot of emphasis on the argument about the English language. Even priests who undertook seminary formation in English may still be required to sit an English language test before coming on supply placements. That strikes me as bizarre.

The British Government's changes will quite simply have both practical and financial implications for parishes. The Home Office needs to understand that visiting clergy not only allow the local parish community to continue to function, but benefit and enrich the whole community, which gains from a cultural exchange and the sharing of knowledge and experience by priests or

[David Linden]

clergy from other parts of the world. When I visit parishes, more often than not I hear about communities being educated about life in other countries. That opens up avenues for local parishes to support communities in need.

I am somewhat intrigued about why this draconian change for visiting clergy was made. As far as I understand, there have been no problems or abuses of the system by churches bringing supply placement clergy to the UK. It is not just the Catholic Church that has expressed concerns about the change; the Church of Scotland is also urging the British Government to reverse the decision. The Rt Rev. Dr Susan Brown, who convenes the Church's World Mission Council, said that she had been "shocked" by this "retrograde step", and is on record as saying:

"The benefit of the time spent in the UK is not just to the individual or to our churches but whole communities. Having the opportunity to have a minister from one of our partner Churches overseas brings a wealth of learning to people about faith and about global issues. Scotland is a welcoming country and we believe that the Church of Scotland can play a great part in this, but if the UK government continues to thwart efforts to invite people to spend time in Scotland for legitimate reasons by making the process more difficult and more expensive then we will be the ones to lose out. We strongly urge the UK government to reverse this change in the visa system."

This is probably not the Minister's natural brief, but he is standing in today, so can he explain why those changes have been introduced? Would he at least concede that they have led to an unintended consequence for local parishes, and does he acknowledge the difficulty that many dioceses now find themselves in? I gather that the Minister for Immigration has agreed to meet faith leaders early next week. That is genuinely very welcome news, and I hope that the Bishops' Conference of Scotland and others are welcome to send a delegate to that meeting.

The Minister knows from the amount of casework that I raise with the Home Office that I have profound differences with the Government on how I would wish to see our immigration system run. I freely acknowledge and accept that, and tempted though I am, I am not going to enter into a wider ideological debate about the hostile environment, "Go home" vans, or any of that stuff. However, surely we can all agree that the changes to the religious worker visas have led to unintended consequences, which are in turn leaving parishes and dioceses in an incredibly, and unnecessarily, difficult position. It is within the Home Office's power to reverse this retrograde decision, and—as I am sure the Minister is about to hear—I, along with other colleagues, call upon him to do so.

3.9 pm

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Gapes. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing the debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for it. The issue is of great concern to parishes in my constituency, as it is in others, not least because many Catholic parishes rely on tier 5 religious worker visas to bring priests to the UK on supply placements, which allows cover for illness, retreats, outings and, of course, much needed holidays. The hon. Gentleman has covered many of the salient points and concerns in his remarks, so I intend to be brief.

I am disappointed not to see the Minister for Immigration, the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), here, but I am sure that the Minister who is here will convey to her our concerns. I simply ask the Minister this: where is the evidence that the changes were necessary? Where is the evidence that large numbers of people were coming to the UK on tier 5 religious worker visas for another purpose? Where is the evidence that ministers of religion are coming in large numbers to the UK to preach, despite not having the English language skills necessary to do so? Is it not a matter for the parish to determine whether a priest or a minister has the appropriate level of English to preach to their congregation? The alternative in many cases is that services will simply not go ahead at all, and we all know the impact that can have when people, many of them elderly or at risk of social isolation and loneliness, lose out on the opportunity to come together as a community to worship, to support one another, and to seek spiritual and practical help.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): My constituents, particularly those at the Sikh gurdwara, rely on tier 5 for religious workers to come in. They do not want the tier 2 so that their religious workers can be here a long time, and neither do they want to stay indefinitely. It really is a short-term issue and religious workers are being absolutely excluded. In my constituency they have already spent more than £1,000, having been refused a visa while the change of policy went through. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need something in the interim, a bit like the old tier 5, so that short-term religious workers can come in and read from the holy book, which is what they need to do? They are not lecturers or cultural exchange people; they are religious workers who do not want to stay here for a long time.

Ged Killen: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and I absolutely agree. Another senseless decision seems to be based once again on the ideology of the Conservative party, rather than on any evidence. The Catholic Church in Scotland is in no doubt whatever that the changes will mean fewer priests will be able to come to Scotland to support local parishes. Perhaps the Minister can tell us, if he is aware, what assessment has been made of the likely impact of the changes. How many people have been refused under the new system who would have been granted a visa under the old one? Is the Home Office aware of how many other people are likely to be refused entry at a later date?

We all have casework that demonstrates how often the Home Office gets decisions wrong. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) raised in a debate in this place just a few weeks ago concerns revealed in the *Financial Times* that the Home Office is using algorithms to process visa applications. Many of my constituents have had applications inexplicably refused, usually because of Home Office errors, which were later overturned following an intervention from my office. As the hon. Member for Glasgow East said earlier, we do not want to get into the wider debate, but I will mention the recent example of my constituent Sabir Zazai, the chief executive of the Scottish Refugee Council. He was being honoured by Glasgow University for 20 years of remarkable contribution to civil society, but his father almost missed out on going to the graduation ceremony, where he was to receive his honorary doctorate,

because he was refused a visit visa. That is exactly the type of case that speaks to the heart of the issue that we are talking about today, although we are talking about a different tier of visas.

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Will the hon. Gentleman speak to the actual motion?

Ged Killen: I apologise, Mr Gapes, but it does speak to the wider issue where mistakes are made all the time. We already have an under-resourced Home Office, which is why we get so many mistakes, making decisions that are not based on any logic, evidence or fairness, but on ideology, and often getting the decisions wrong and causing enormous hurt to individuals and families. In this case we are talking about what was a relatively straightforward process for ministers of religion to come to this country and we are making it needlessly more complicated, which will inevitably lead to more incorrect decisions and will have a huge impact on local parishes up and down the country.

We are left with the question of why we are doing this. What problem are the Government attempting to fix? We know the problems they will create: parishes in constituencies such as Rutherglen and Hamilton West will be unable to maintain the high level of service that they offer in communities that often badly need it. Coffee mornings, youth clubs, bingo nights, food banks and counselling services are all compromised by the changes. I ask the Minister to convey to the Immigration Minister the concerns raised today, and I ask them to seriously reconsider the decision.

3.15 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. It was also a pleasure to hear the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) introduce the debate. I wish to discuss some points that this debate generates.

The hon. Gentleman set out the background issues very clearly. As he pointed out and as the letter from the Catholic Church clearly points out, the debate is held in the context of the supply of priests, particularly in the summer, and allowing the laity to continue to attend mass. So there are two issues at stake: the laity attending mass and the priests being allowed a holiday. I am all for priests being allowed a holiday, just as I am all for MPs being allowed a holiday. As an aside, when I first came into this House, a very senior Member said to me, "The person you should acquaint yourself with to get the right sort of status is the suffragan bishop." Members can interpret that as they wish. Whether the popularity of MPs and suffragan bishops has taken the same turn is something I will leave for others to decide.

We have heard about a change whereby visiting priests are required to apply under tier 2 rather than under tier 5, and that is producing problems, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) illustrated, as well as costs for various communities. There are also English language burdens they have to suffer and a little more red tape than under the current scheme. However, I do not think the problem is widely shared among all religious communities. The hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) nods. I will illustrate how it is not the case in some communities.

I accept that it is a case for the Catholic Church and for many others, but we live in a world where it is very difficult for anyone to recruit priests. Although this is perhaps the subject of an additional debate on another occasion, I point out that Anglicans are in a much better position because they have admitted women as priests. They therefore have an enormous supply of priests who are available and ministering. Whether the Catholic Church wants to take up my suggestion is a matter for it to decide and I will not interfere.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I am sitting here as a Catholic utterly stunned by what the hon. Gentleman suggests. He is here in Westminster Hall suggesting that the Catholic Church should change its policies because of what he perceives to be an issue and because of the actions of the Government. Honestly?

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Order. I know it is tempting to have a wider debate, but will Members, including Mr Howell, focus on the motion before us?

John Howell: Thank you, Mr Gapes. To respond briefly, I was not suggesting that; I was leaving it to the Catholic Church to decide. As I said, we can debate that issue on a separate occasion, but I think my point is a valid one.

I made inquiries in the Anglican Church about whether it has this problem. The answer was no, it does not have this problem, for a number of reasons. First, there is a supply of Anglican women priests, so the supply issue is taken care of. Secondly, Anglican ministries are organised increasingly in teams, so someone is always around; because all the members of the team do not take their holiday at the same time, someone in the team is always available to cover for others in the ministry. It is important to bear that in mind.

Carol Monaghan: The Catholic Church organises in teams as well, but the smaller groups within the archdiocese have priests who are already stretched to the absolute limit. When one takes a well-earned break, the others are simply asked to do even more. For them just to pick up the slack, as suggested, is unsustainable.

John Howell: The hon. Lady makes an interesting point, but I return to mine: we live in a time when it is very difficult to get enough people to come forward for the priesthood of whichever denomination.

David Linden: The hon. Gentleman will realise that in my speech I quoted the Very Reverend Dr Susan Brown, who is both a woman and a member of the Church of Scotland, which permits female clergy. If the Church of Scotland, which is not the Catholic Church, acknowledges that this is a problem and one not specifically related to gender, does that not drive a coach and horses through his argument?

John Howell: I am tempted to say that if it is not just a Catholic problem, perhaps it is a Scottish problem.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman's argument. Does he accept that the issue that we should be debating is whether the changes are right in principle? They might not affect every single religious grouping to the same degree, but the question that we parliamentarians should talk about is whether the changes are right in principle.

John Howell: I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention, but I do not see the two as different; I see them as all part of the same problem. I will go back to my comments on the Anglican Church.

Valerie Vaz: The hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time in allowing us to intervene. I am a Roman Catholic, but I speak on behalf not just of that Church but of the religion directly affected by the changes, which is the Sikh religion. He is right when he talks about the Church of England, but that is exactly it: it is the Church of England; many of the others are international religions and therefore need religious workers to come here. More to the point, does he not agree with having an interchange of people of different faiths coming to this country, whether of the Catholic Church or of any other religion? Does it not mean that we are able to look beyond our shores, therefore helping international relations, and not only understanding each of our own religions here but understanding them internationally?

John Howell: I am happy to refer to the Church of England as part of the Anglican Communion, which is a worldwide organisation that exists in so many countries that one might have thought that if there were a problem, it too would experience exactly the same problem, because there are exchanges of people between different countries, dioceses and parishes.

I will take my glasses off to read what Christian Concern said, because it is in quite small print. It states that “it is possible to enter the UK as a ‘business visitor’ to undertake some preaching...provided the person’s base is abroad”.

That is the basis on which the exchange of Anglican personnel takes place; it is not that the Anglicans do not invite colleagues from the Anglican Communion to come over to preach in their churches. I have been to many services at which the preacher has come from a country overseas. We need to ensure that we do not get two things confused: the restrictions on the priesthood, which I know exist, for whatever reason; and the changes to the immigration system.

Last, I mention my close contacts with the Jewish community. I appreciate, from conversations beforehand with the hon. Member for Glasgow East, that his view is that the Jewish community in Scotland has similar problems. However, I asked my Jewish colleagues exactly where the problem was likely to occur in the Jewish community, and most if not all of those I questioned did not see this as a problem for them. Again, we have to go back to this being a much more complex question than simply one of visas.

I offer those reasons up as a view on the issue and to widen the debate.

3.26 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes.

Since we have just heard from the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) about women priests, I take this opportunity to place on record my congratulations to the Reverend Rose Hudson-Wilkin on her appointment as Bishop of Dover—our loss but most definitely the Church of England’s gain down in Dover.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this debate. I was happy to support his bid at the Backbench Business

Committee. I also thank the various different campaign groups and constituents who have been raising awareness of the issue for several months now, especially those from the Catholic community who are in effect being penalised by the Government’s policy decision to change the criteria for visas for religious workers and ministers of religion.

My simple first question to the Minister is this: what is the Government’s message to the parishioners of the Immaculate Conception church on Maryhill Road in my constituency? Throughout the month of August, they will not be able to worship at their church at the usual Sunday evening mass, because the usual arrangements for cover and supply priests are no longer possible, thanks to the change of policy. Why are the UK Government, led by a professed Christian who forever speaks about the importance of faith to our culture and society, going out of their way to deny our Christian communities the right to worship? That is the direct effect of the policy change.

I will look briefly at the background, the deeper roots, specific examples—some of which we have already heard—and some possible solutions. Ministers have heard several times in recent weeks, not least from SNP Members, that despite all the rhetoric to the contrary, the evidence is clear that the hostile environment is still alive and well in the Home Office and UK Visas and Immigration. Whatever consultation the Government claim to have carried out and whatever notice they claim to have given to faith communities, it clearly was not enough, as the extent of the difficulties caused by the change has only become clear in recent months as parishes made plans for the summer.

The rationale for the changes introduced in December last year, whereby ministers of religion may no longer apply for temporary religious worker visas under tier 5 of the immigration rules, seems to be largely based on proficiency in the English language, which leads to my second question to the Minister. This was not really about Christian or Catholic ministers, was it? Looking at the detail of the policy in the explanatory notes, written statement HCWS1159 dated 6 December 2018 states that the rules are to prevent

“religious workers to perform roles, that include preaching and leading a congregation, without first being required to demonstrate that they speak English to an acceptable standard.”

It is pretty clear that the change is targeted at religions—one in particular, I suspect—that do not usually conduct their forms of worship in English. It stands to reason that faith communities that conduct services primarily in English would not have much to gain by bringing in preachers who are not fluent in that language.

The second aspect of the change is the 12-month cooling-off period, which clearly smacks of security concerns far more than the risk of visitors simply overstaying their permit for a few weeks or months. If the Government chose to introduce that change for security reasons, they should have the guts to make that clear. Whether or not the consequences are unintended, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East said, they are real.

We heard some specific examples; I mentioned one in my constituency and I am aware of many more across the archdiocese of Glasgow. The decision puts massive pressure on our own priests and ministers, who may miss out on the opportunity for rest, retreat or physical recuperation if they are unwell. They have to choose

between their own long-term wellbeing and the provision of often vital services in their parishes, many of which reach out beyond the immediate faith or worshipping community that they serve.

I have a personal connection with three very good Malawian priest friends who are studying in Rome, Fathers Dan, Isaac and Kondwani. They first had to complete their seminary training in Malawi in English; they are probably proficient in at least than one vernacular language; they will probably have proficiency in Latin and, because they live in Rome, they will be proficient in Italian, too. They have been unable to acquire tier 5 visas this year that, in previous years, would have been routine at a cost of around £200. One of the sponsoring parishes is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands)—St Conval's in Linwood. It reckons that to bring those priests over under the new process would have cost well over £1,000, between the visas and the various test and proofs required. That is totally prohibitive and leaves parishes across that diocese struggling to cope.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am grateful that my hon. Friend raises that point; it is not the first time that he has assisted with issues relating to Linwood, particularly in connection with Malawi. Not only did Father Michael McMahon of St Conval's get in touch with me but the Bishop of Paisley, Bishop John Keenan. Father Michael has just come back from a trip to Malawi with St Benedict's High School; he said that not only can the parish not afford those elevated costs; the wider diocese cannot absorb them at all. Simply put, there are no winners from the policy change at all.

Patrick Grady: The complete opposite is the case: the change is having a detrimental effect. In the past, visiting priests would have come for two or three months perhaps, spending a couple of weeks in each parish. They would have built warm and supportive relationships and they would have come back on a regular basis. Now, those parishes have to strip back their worship schedules and many other support services that run alongside them. That is repeated across Scotland and the United Kingdom, as we hear.

The Bishops' Conference of Scotland has said that in all the years it has sponsored priests through the tier 5 process, it has not been aware of any abuses of the system. Visiting priests are tied by religious vows to return to their home diocese at the request of their bishop, to say nothing of their own personal and family ties. Once again, the base assumption of the Home Office's immigration rules is that the streets of mother Britannia are so paved with gold that the only reason anyone would want come here is to abscond while on their visa and sponge off the NHS and the welfare state. That is simply not the case, and it is insulting to those visitors to suggest otherwise.

What are the solutions? The simple solution would be simply to undo the change and revert to the previous system. At the very least, the Home Office, at ministerial level, must be prepared to continue to engage directly with all the stakeholders across the UK who are interested in this issue. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East said, I believe a meeting is taking place with the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, but Ministers

should be willing also to meet the Bishops' Conference of Scotland and its representatives. I am sure that Ministers know the Catholic Church in Scotland has its own history and governance, which is distinct from that south of the border.

What is really needed is a deeper, more fundamental review of the overall immigration rules and the hostile environment. The Vote Office kindly produced an extract of the immigration rules for me, which are vast. The document comes with an erratum. With the greatest respect to the drafting officials, it is so complicated; no one could keep track of it. One correction, to the

"Statement of Changes in Immigration Rules, presented to Parliament pursuant to section 3(2) of the Immigration Act 1971, Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed on 11 December 2018, HC1779",

states:

"On page 8, for change 6A.13 where it reads, '... paragraph 245ZP(f)(2)...' it should instead read as, '... paragraph 245ZP(f)(iii)(2)...'."

I tracked that down on page 41 of a document that runs to hundreds of pages. This is what small Catholic parishes are being asked to get to grips with when trying to bring over their priests. That is why the whole system needs to be fundamentally reviewed. Other Members have touched on wider issues in the immigration and visa system. The all-party parliamentary group for Africa and the all-party parliamentary group on Malawi are to publish a report on that in a couple of weeks. I hope the Minister will confirm that his colleague the Minister for Immigration plans to attend that launch on 16 July.

As I said at the start, the experience of anyone navigating this system is that it is designed with deliberate hostility, suspicion and to minimise the chances of a successful application. That is seriously beginning to harm the global reputation of a Government who at the same time are spending millions on a campaign to say that we are open for business and that Britain is great. For a middle eastern academic trying to come to a university conference, an author from Belarus trying to get to the Edinburgh book festival or a west African roots band wanting to play at Celtic Connections, it is not great and we are not open for business. Now, it is not great for a simple priest who wants to come and help communities pray for a few months over the summer. Those are all real, verifiable examples.

All Ministers will be wondering over the next few weeks what their legacies will be. Here is an opportunity for the Home Office to reverse this policy and launch a wider review of the overall visa system. Otherwise, the legacy will be one of shutting the door, in pursuit of an ideological and arbitrary net migration target, perpetuating a hostile environment that has done nothing but damage this country's economy, culture, society and global reputation.

3.36 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this important debate. The removal of tier 5 visas for visiting clergy was first brought to my attention by my friend Monsignor Peter Smith of St Paul's Parish in Whiteinch. Monsignor Smith was part of the original team that met the Government as the tiers were introduced. At that time, the Government suggested that there was no need for

[Carol Monaghan]

tier 5 visas. However, Monsignor Smith argued strongly for having access to tier 5 as well as tier 2. He pointed out that not all our visitors wish to be on the path of leave to remain, as tier 2 allows.

Priests who come here are all incardinated in their own home diocese. We do not want to change or disturb that. The tier 5 route allows us to have priests here for short terms. As the number of clergy decreases, for whatever reason, more is expected of the few we have. Priests often have responsibility for several parishes, so they are battling to provide spiritual leadership and to administer God's work. Monsignor Smith himself is seriously ill—in any other profession, he probably would not work. But we are not talking about regular work. These people are living out their vocation and dedicating their lives to their faith communities.

In the Catholic Church we have many lay people who are stepping up to take on some of the responsibility and provide some sort of service when priests are extremely stretched, but they cannot provide the sacraments, celebrate mass or perform baptisms. We need priests, but when they are stretched to the limit we have to look at other ways. Even the priests who are serving in such a way must have time to refresh, reflect and renew themselves spiritually. Breaks from the parish are therefore essential to enable their continued service. The tier 5 visa allows archdioceses to get priests to the UK to allow our own priests time to recharge.

Many visiting priests are already in the EU as postgraduate students at universities in Rome or Louvain, so it is less expensive to bring them here to help. These priests are keen to experience more of Europe while they are away from home, and it suits parishes to be able to have their services during the summer vacation. They regularly go to the same parish, year after year, and build up a relationship with the parishioners. It is a win-win situation.

I understand the desire for good English for tier 2, but visiting priests are here for only a short time and congregations are so thankful to have them that any potential language difficulties are simply not an issue. Bear in mind that mass used to be said in Latin and most people had no understanding of that.

The tier 5 priest is a visitor to the parish. They bring a vision of the church beyond our borders and the parishioners love having them. They cope with less than perfect English—although, in many cases these priests probably have better English than myself and some of my colleagues—because it is only for a few weeks and not a permanent arrangement. Everything that the parishioners gain from having that priest outweighs any potential difficulties. Tier 5 visas need English of a lesser standard than that required for tier 2 visas.

I had a letter from a constituent recently who accused the SNP of being anti-faith—specifically anti-Catholic—as a result of these visa changes. I politely pointed out that much as we would love powers over immigration to be devolved to the Scottish Government, these ill thought out visa changes are the work of this Tory Government. I direct my constituent's comments to the Minister and ask: are these changes simply incompetence, or are the Government now deliberately targeting Christian faith communities with their hostile environment? That is how it appears.

I wrote to the Home Secretary about the issue back in April and finally got a response from the Minister for Immigration two weeks ago. She said:

“These changes align our visa arrangements with the Government's wider commitment to building strong integrated communities.”

Can the Minister explain how depriving Christians of their faith leaders could possibly lead to strong, integrated communities?

The Minister for Immigration has repeatedly said that tier 2 visas are a possibility, but we have heard why that is not suitable. The English language requirement, along with the increased cost, makes this utterly unsustainable for most parishes that are already financially stretched. Without the presence of tier 5 priests over the summer, many of our priests will be deprived of their time to recharge and many parishioners will be deprived of services. It will come to a point that we will simply have to close the parish while the priest is on holiday.

Parishes are more than just a faith community; for many people, particularly the elderly and the vulnerable, they are a vital lifeline. I think of my own elderly parents, because their church is such an important part of their life; it is what gets them out of the house in the morning and gives them great purpose. Without it, serious problems with loneliness and isolation for many elderly people would be caused.

Ultimately, we need both types of visa: one for temporary summer placements that are usually repeated for a short period of time over a number of years, with no path to leave to remain; and one for more lengthy placements, where tier 2 would be more appropriate. The UK says that it champions freedom of religious practice, but the removal of tier 5 visas for visiting priests calls that into question. How can Catholics fully practise their faith when mass cannot be celebrated because of these policies? We have seen many groups targeted in this hostile environment. Surely this Government are not now targeting God.

3.44 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I had not intended to speak, so thank you for giving me the time to do so. I will be very brief and ask the Minister just a few questions.

As I mentioned earlier, I have a gurdwara in my constituency that has found it difficult to bring priests in. The point about the tier 5 visa is that such priests read from the holy book, which is not in English, so they are required to speak the Sikh language—the Punjabi language. The priests want to be here for only a short time. Having heard everything that hon. Members have said, would the Minister consider interim measures? Otherwise, can he say how I can bring in the priests? They have been refused twice, and there is a new system in place. How is it possible for them to come here? I have been told by those at the gurdwara that they are desperate to get them in. No other member of the congregation can perform the function that the priests can undertake.

Could the Minister also say what is happening to the licence system? Is it currently suspended? Many gurdwaras and other religious places apply under a licence, under which there are checks and balances to ensure that they can bring in their religious workers. What is happening

to that system? Finally, could the Minister arrange for the Minister for Immigration to meet hon. Members as soon as possible to discuss our individual cases?

3.46 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is good to see you in the chair, Mr Gapes. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and the hon. Members for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), and for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) for securing the debate—it is truly a cross-party campaign as well as an interfaith campaign. I pay tribute to all hon. Members who have taken part today. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) made a particularly brave speech, but I say gently to him that I think he slightly missed the point. His argument was that the changes that the Government have introduced have not been too bad. The whole point, that all hon. Members have focused on, is that there has been absolutely nothing at all to justify the changes being made in the first place.

As hon. Members across the House have already explained, the tier 5 religious visas were operating perfectly smoothly for the many churches and religious organisations that relied upon them, until these unexpected changes were made in December last year. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East said, what we are talking about is churches bringing in overseas ministers and priests a couple of times a year—perhaps in the summer, or at Easter or Christmas—to allow local religious leaders to take congregations on a trip, to go on retreat, to recover from ill health or even just to have a holiday.

We are talking about not only Christian churches, but other religions too. I have heard directly about a Buddhist temple and a Sikh gurdwara that have been negatively impacted. The hon. Members for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) made important interventions about how important these routes are for gurdwaras in their constituencies.

In my constituency, parishioners from St Lucy's in Cumbernauld were among the first to contact me about the issue. Father Campbell wrote to me at the end of April, saying that the changes

“will have a vast impact on me and our parishioners here, as we rely on Father Alex Mpaggi coming to allow me a holiday in July and to accompany 50 parishioners to Lourdes in France, also in July.”

Those are the nuts and bolts of what these changes have almost destroyed.

This is about the support that visiting priests and celebrants can provide. It is important to say, as hon. Members have done today, that visiting clergy in themselves enrich the life of the churches that they work at with their new ideas and approaches, and by sharing knowledge of different cultures. That point was made by the Rt Rev. Susan Brown from the Church of Scotland, as quoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East in his speech.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) said, over the course of time close relationships are built up between parishes and priests. For example, Father Mpaggi has been coming to St. Lucy's in Cumbernauld since 2013. When he comes he leads worship, carries out the celebrations of

holy mass, including marriage, and conducts funerals and supports the bereaved. All of that is now put in jeopardy.

As other Members have explained, churches and other places of worship are not only about worship, although that is obviously their central function; they also form important parts of their communities, and indeed are communities in themselves. It is about the youth clubs, the coffee mornings, the pensioner clubs, the mother and toddler groups, the food banks and the soup kitchens. The same visiting clergy also help to carry out those important functions.

These arrangements were working well, but now they are not, because the changes that the Immigration Minister introduced are already having a negative impact. The Home Office has more than doubled the cost to parishes. As Father Campbell has told me, that means “making supply-cover effectively unaffordable”. He expressed concern about the impact that the changes will have on the health of local priests if they cannot afford to bring in the support that they need and have relied on in recent years. Those costs arise not only from the visa fees, but from unnecessary English tests. As Father Campbell points out:

“Even priests who have undertaken seminary formation in English may be required to sit an English language test before coming on supply-placements. This will have both practical and financial implications”.

My first big question for the Minister is: why? Where is the evidence, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) put it? Why did the rules have to change? What is the justification? Is the problem so significant that it merits creating all these other problems for our churches?

The Immigration Minister's written statement, letters and answers firstly point to some sort of problem with ministers of religion coming over and taking on roles such as preaching and leading congregations while not being able to speak a good standard of English. Her various responses have also referred to the need for integration. So far, I find those explanations flimsy and utterly unconvincing.

As one of the 100 or so constituents who contacted me said:

“I have attended services in Synagogue where the language used was Hebrew and in other faiths where the language used was Hindi, Gujarati or whatever. That may not suit the British Government but it is a reality”.

In short, is it really any business of the Government if religious celebrants spend short periods here and preach in different languages? The shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South, made that point very strongly, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West.

Similarly, integration of the religious workers, which the Immigration Minister referred to in her various letters, is not really relevant here. As the shadow Leader of the House also pointed out, nobody is proposing that these people will live here permanently or become settled here. In fact, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West powerfully pointed out, the integration argument is completely the other way round, because community integration and social solidarity are undermined if these religious workers can no longer come to do all the work they have previously.

[Stuart C. McDonald]

As a spokesperson for the Bishop's Conference of Scotland said today:

"Catholic parishes, without the support of visiting priests, would be unable to provide the level of service to the local community that it does at present, such as Masses, weddings, funerals, comforting the bereaved, tending to the sick and needy, and many other works of charity including food banks and soup kitchens."

I have seen no good reason for these changes, and certainly none that justifies creating all these other consequences.

Now, let us be incredibly kind and imagine for a minute that the Minister manages to explain today why exactly these changes have been made in this particular way. That is being very optimistic, but in any event it would still not be an end to the matter. Even if, having listened to the Minister, we took the view that reform was necessary, surely there must be another way to accommodate the needs of all the churches we have heard from without undermining whatever strange purpose the Home Office is pursuing? Surely it cannot be beyond the wit of the Home Office to come up with something that is a better fit, and a more reasonably priced fit, for those ministers and priests who come just for very short stays to support the work of our churches from time to time?

Tier 2 is not designed with these scenarios in mind, and neither is the new tier 5. Nor, I believe, is the business visitor route, which is not even something that the Home Office has until this point prayed in aid. Why not offer a low-cost two or three-year visa, for example, which does not have the same stringent requirements regarding English qualifications, which allows applicants to work as ministers or to lead worship, but which sets a maximum stay of a certain number of weeks or months in any calendar year to prevent any circumvention of the tier 2 requirements? Surely the Government could work up something along those lines?

As the shadow Leader of the House said, it is important that that is done as a matter of urgency, even on an interim basis, because this is harming parishes and other religious organisations right now, this very summer. I join the calls on the Home Office to engage in discussion about how the impact of these changes can be reversed, or at the very least ameliorated. I also join the calls for Ministers to meet representatives of churches, including churches in Scotland, to discuss the impact that these rules are having.

Finally, I turn to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), powerfully flagging up the poor consultation and policy-making process. That takes me back to one of my hobby-horses, which is how we go about making immigration policy. Is this not the perfect example of why leaving it to the Home Office does not work? I dare say officials believed that they had thought through all the implications, but they had not. Meanwhile, MPs were barely aware that changes had been made, and if they were aware, they were, as my hon. Friend pointed out, completely unable to decipher what they meant or what the implications would be.

That is why, when the Immigration Bill was in Committee, I proposed an exciting, shiny immigration equivalent of the Social Security Advisory Committee, so that experts

could scrutinise Home Office proposals, flag up concerns, allow others to give input and give MPs advice on what needed further scrutiny. I was sad that my proposals did not have the Committee as excited as I was. Seriously, though, we do need to think how we go about consulting and scrutinising immigration rule changes.

In conclusion, I again commend hon. Friends and colleagues for bringing this debate on an important issue. I hope that the Home Office will listen and provide a better route for visiting priests and ministers to keep coming and carrying out the vital temporary work that they do. But, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North said, if we had a better system of scrutiny, we could hopefully avoid these mess-ups happening in the first place.

3.55 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this important debate about religious workers' visas.

For some time, the House has heard about the hostile environment, which would appear to be a hostile environment for religious ministers. The Government have cast the change as a matter of regulatory tidiness and of ensuring that religious ministers can speak English, but as the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) points out, why would a congregation that routinely conducts its services in English try to bring across a priest who did not speak English?

Religious ministers have been removed from tier 5 visas and are now obliged to apply for tier 2 visas, for which an English language proficiency test can be included in a successful application. Ministers must know, however—and have received representations to this effect—that the change is unwieldy, costly, bureaucratic and discriminatory. Ministers must have been made aware by representatives of a range of faith communities that the measures are a blockage to faith communities, to the religious ministers they need to lead them, whether temporarily or for a little longer, and to good community relations. Yet here we are with a Minister defending a policy that many in the community question.

In fact, Ministers announced this change to long-standing policy towards the end of the parliamentary Session last year. Can the Minister tell us what consultation was conducted prior to that change? What were the results of that consultation, and what risk assessments were done for Ministers by Home Office officials before the decision was taken and the policy announced? Do Ministers understand that Catholic priests, rabbis, imams and many others need holidays and cannot be on call 365 days a year, or that they have to visit loved ones or go abroad for further study? They might even get ill, and they need people to stand in for them as occasion arises.

As we have heard, the shift to tier 2 is costly, time-consuming, bureaucratic and unnecessary. We have heard about the issues with English language at tier 2, and about the fact that tier 2 visas are much more expensive than tier 5 visas and put a considerable financial burden on faith communities. As a whole, tier 2 visas are also subject to a numerical cap, which is surely folly. It means that people who we need for our economy and public services may be refused a visa solely on the grounds that the number has already been met, and religious ministers have to compete in that total.

In explaining the change of policy, Ministers have stated that:

“This change will prevent migrants from using the tier 5 Religious Worker route to fill positions as Ministers of Religion, and instead direct them towards the appropriate”—

the Opposition would query that appropriateness—

“category of tier 2...The ‘cooling off’ period will ensure tier 5 Religious workers and Charity Workers spend a minimum of 12 months outside the UK before returning...This will prevent migrants from applying for consecutive visas”.

So, there you have it: this whole discriminatory rigmarole is an effort to prevent people, of whatever religious faith, from using what Ministers seem to think is a loophole to come into this country on a permanent basis. I hope that, having listened to Members from across the House, the Minister recognises that no one is talking about a loophole but about the very real needs of faith communities. Maybe he will tell us how many people he thinks sneak their way into the country under a religious cloth. A handful? Dozens? What evidence can Ministers provide for that outlandish proposition?

We pride ourselves—or used to—on being a religiously tolerant society, but these measures do not seem religiously tolerant to those of us here today or to the wider community. This discriminatory policy is causing distress in faith communities of all types across the country. It should be a matter of concern for those of all faiths and none. In 30 years in the House, this is not the first time that I have seen immigration measures brought in willy-nilly to target a specific community—for example, the Muslim faith—but catching all sorts of faiths. If the Home Office has a particular ill in mind, it needs better drafted legislation and better conducted administration.

We should not dictate to anyone who their faith leaders should be. We should recognise and honour the contribution that faith communities make to our society. The Government should take note of the debate, meet hon. Members from across the House and—I sincerely hope—change policy as a result.

4.1 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. You may wonder what the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service is doing responding to a debate on immigration. You are not alone. The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) expressed regret that the Immigration Minister is not here to respond to the debate. He is not alone in that view. I think I heard that 70 Members supported the debate through the Backbench Business Committee. Clearly, any Minister must listen to that; that is a serious weight of Members expressing concern. I genuinely congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and his partners on securing the debate. I will do my very best to answer the central questions directed at the Government about why the changes were made.

I state right from the start that I know from conversations with the Immigration Minister, who genuinely cannot be here today, that she is well aware of the growing sensitivities and distress around this issue—weighted in, but not exclusive to, Scotland. She is alive to that, and as the hon. Member for Glasgow East is aware, she is next week meeting representatives of most faith leaders to discuss this issue at a roundtable, and I understand that bishops from Scotland are invited. I am absolutely persuaded that she is disposed to engaging and listening

to concerns on this and other subjects, and I am sure that she will listen to requests for meetings as well—I reference the specific request of the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz).

Carol Monaghan: We appreciate that this Minister is not the one who we would have liked to see here, but although the Immigration Minister has now agreed to meet faith representatives and Church leaders, that took six months of asking. There has been a genuine unwillingness on the part of the Immigration Minister to meet those Church leaders.

Mr Hurd: I am not sure how fair that is, because I do not know the background to those conversations. However, I know the Immigration Minister well. She is the listening type, and I think she is entirely sincere in saying that she recognises the sensitivities that have emerged from this policy change.

Before I go into why there were changes, it is always helpful to assert the common ground. Many Members—the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) was particularly powerful on this—spoke about the importance and the value of faith communities in all our constituencies. I think she spoke for many of us in expressing the importance of those communities, not least in giving many people a sense of strength and purpose. I absolutely recognise that from my constituency and the extraordinary work of churches such as Emmanuel Church in Northwood, the Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue and St Martin’s Church in Ruislip, to mention three.

We all know the fundamental truth of that, and I think we all agree with the point about the added value of contributions made by members of religious institutions from overseas, which is at the heart of the debate. That is why the immigration system maintains dedicated arrangements for religious workers, with two dedicated visa categories providing for those seeking to come to the UK to fill long-term vacancies and shorter-term postings. As hon. Members know, the requirements necessarily differ between the two, to ensure that the system is used in an appropriate manner.

The adjective “generous” is not often attached to the Home Office, but we think that this is a generous offer. However, it must be balanced against ensuring that those wishing to lead congregations, regularly performing the primary rites and rituals of their faith, are subject to stronger requirements than those coming to the UK to fill supporting roles for shorter periods. We believe that those tasked with leading roles within our churches, synagogues, mosques and temples must be able to demonstrate a strong command of the English language, which is fundamental to the change to tier 2. The changes that the Government have introduced ensure that all those seeking to undertake such important roles can explain their teachings in English to all in the community, not just to their congregation.

Stuart C. McDonald: This is fundamental: are churches, mosques and synagogues not better placed to assess the level of English required for priests and other religious leaders to lead worship in their communities, and whether applicants coming in under tier 5 have the skill required?

Mr Hurd: I completely understand that point, which was raised earlier. The Government’s position is that it is important that the same rules apply to all, in the

[Mr Hurd]

interests of fairness, hence the test centre requirements. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that exemptions exist where applicants have been awarded a recognised degree.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, the root of the changes introduced in January 2019 was the June 2018 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government consultation on the integrated communities strategy. The Green Paper set out the Government's intention to strengthen English language skills by supporting UK residents and strengthening requirements for those who wish to come here. The rationale behind that approach is that ministers of religion play a visible role in our religious institutions and must therefore be able to integrate with the wider communities in which they live and serve, rather than only being able to speak to their congregations.

Valerie Vaz: The Minister is doing an excellent job—he is an excellent Minister; I say that with sincerity—and he has been very helpful so far, but he is confusing social cohesion and religion. I made the point that the Sikh holy book is not in English. The priests who are required to come over have to read it in their language.

Mr Hurd: I absolutely understand that point. On the hon. Lady's direct question on the specific problem of her constituent, while I obviously do not know the individual case, one of the three visa entry routes may well be relevant for the role that she described, not least the visitor visa route. With respect, she should engage on that directly with officials, which I can help to facilitate.

Stuart C. McDonald: The Minister is indeed doing a sterling job in difficult circumstances. On integration, the other fundamental point that the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), made earlier was that nobody is saying that these people want to come and live here, so integration is not really relevant. They have a job to do over a very short period and then they head back to their home countries. Integration really is not at the heart of this issue, or should not be.

Mr Hurd: My understanding of the situation is that, in large part because the Government recognise the importance and value of the contributions to our religious institutions made by people from overseas, we have three separate visa routes in to try to facilitate that process. The changes made in January 2019 require individuals seeking to enter the UK as a minister of religion to use tier 2, demonstrating their command of the English language. To be clear, tier 2 is for religious leaders such as priests, imams, rabbis, missionaries and members of religious orders taking employment or a role within a faith-based community. Those applicants can come for up to three years, with an option to extend for up to six years, and possible indefinite leave to remain after five years' continuous—[Interruption.]

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Order.

Mr Hurd: With respect, Mr Gapes, I have been asked to clarify what the policy is and I am endeavouring to do that.

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Order. I would be grateful if hon. Members did not all shout out at once but allowed the Minister to continue his speech. If Members wish to intervene, can they please do so without making too much noise?

Mr Hurd: I am happy to take an intervention from the hon. Member for Glasgow East.

David Linden: I am incredibly grateful to the Minister for giving way. I sense that, although he is the Fire Minister and is trying to fight fire here, he understands that he has been asked to flog a dead horse today. The fact is that people do not come to be here indefinitely. They come here to cover a month to enable priests or other faith leaders to go on holiday, so the idea that we are talking about people coming here indefinitely and integrating is surely for the birds.

Mr Hurd: Some may want to. That is why we have the different tiers of visas for people in different circumstances. I completely understand that the heart of the concern, particularly among Scottish Members of Parliament, is not about individuals who want to stay here longer, but about people coming in to fill gaps over the summer. I completely accept that point. I am just trying to set out, because I was asked to, what the policy background is and trying to answer the fundamental question posed: why have the Government made the changes?

Stuart C. McDonald: The Minister is being very generous with his time. I think that we have just come to the nub of the issue. He is describing different visas, but I think what we have discovered in the course of this debate is that none of them fits the circumstances of what we have been describing this afternoon—people who come temporarily but nevertheless want to carry out the roles of leaders of congregations and ministers of religion. Short-term visas do not allow people to lead a congregation, but the longer-term visas are completely inappropriate, because people are coming only for short-term visits, so we need to invent a new visa. I think that is the ultimate point.

Mr Hurd: I am not sure that the Government agree with that position, but it is clearly one held by the hon. Gentleman and other Members of Parliament, so it is clearly something that needs to be discussed and tabled at the roundtable next week with the Minister for Immigration and in subsequent follow-up. That is the nature of this place: we change rules; we make laws. We do that, believe it or not, with good intentions, although conspiracy theories have been articulated this afternoon. We do impact assessments. Then—as in this case—after a few months, issues begin to arise and concerns need to be dealt with. In the democracy that we live in, it is incumbent on the Government and the Minister at the time to listen very carefully, engage with those who have a problem and, in a democratic process, work through that. And I am absolutely sure that the Minister for Immigration will do that.

Patrick Grady: The Minister is being generous with the time available, and I appreciate that this is not his specific brief, but he is talking about the reasons for the Government's decisions and he has mentioned conspiracy theories. I think that, when I said that I think there are

security reasons behind this change, I saw the Minister shaking his head, so is he prepared to say that it has not been introduced because of security concerns and because of particular religions where the visiting ministers of religion would not necessarily have proficiency in English?

Mr Hurd: I certainly do not think that is the case. If I understand the hon. Gentleman's line of thinking—it has not been made explicit—he needs to recognise that the original instinct came from the previous Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, in terms of the integrated communities strategy. That might possibly undermine the hon. Gentleman's point.

With your permission, Mr Gapes, I shall try to answer directly the fundamental question of the what and the why for the policy. I have set out that the new requirement is for individuals seeking to enter the UK as a minister of religion to use tier 2, demonstrating their command of the English language. We are also introducing, as has been noted, cooling-off periods for the tier 5 religious worker and charity worker routes. Applicants who have held a visa in one of those categories will not be permitted to hold another visa in the same category for 12 months after expiry of their leave. The immigration rules had previously permitted tier 5 religious workers to fill roles that may include preaching, pastoral work and non-pastoral work. That allowed an applicant to come to the UK and fill a role as a minister of religion without demonstrating an ability to speak English. That is no longer possible and, as we have discussed, applicants must use tier 2 to accommodate that.

The cooling-off period for the tier 5 religious and charity worker categories was introduced because we had become aware of a small but increasing number of religious and charity workers who were living in the UK on a near permanent basis, returning overseas for only a brief period to renew their visa. On the point that was made, I do not detect in the change and I am certainly not aware that underlying that are concerns about security. It is more concerns, as I said, about people using the system to live in the UK on a near permanent basis, which was not the original intention.

The shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), and others asked about the process of consultation. There is a sense that people have been bounced into this and that the ground was not prepared, so let me restate that the changes were included in the “Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper”, which was published on 14 March 2018. Stakeholders were invited to respond. The Minister for Immigration chose to write directly to faith leaders in December 2018, before the rules took effect. That letter set out the detail and explained the rationale behind the changes. As I have said, the Minister for Immigration is extremely clear about her wish to hear directly from religious leaders themselves, and that is the context of the meeting that she is chairing next week. She wants to listen to concerns and discuss the future system.

The Government therefore feel that there was consultation and communication. To what degree the messages have been absorbed and people have focused on them is obviously open to debate. It is quite possible that people have started to focus on them only as we have got closer to the time when applications are made and positions need to be filled. We understand that, but the Government's view is that we did engage, communicate

and consult, and if people have problems, we need to see the evidence; the process needs to be evidence-led. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) stirred the debate up, but he also made the important point that in the Anglican community, there does not seem to be an issue. The Government must listen to evidence, but those with problems and concerns must present evidence in those discussions.

Ged Killen: I am glad that the Minister is talking about evidence, because he was also asked in the course of the debate what evidence the changes were built on. It seems to me that the Home Office was trying to fix a problem that did not exist and has ended up creating a whole range of new problems. Is there an evidence base? I appreciate that the Minister is up against it today, but does he have in front of him an evidence base that was used to inform the decision?

Mr Hurd: I am grateful for the empathy shown by the hon. Gentleman in saying that I am up against it. He should come to more police debates.

The changes that seem to be causing the most difficulty for hon. Members are the changes to the visa arrangement from tier 5 to tier 2. I have tried to explain that these changes are rooted in the strategy incubated in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which focuses on the importance of reinforcing the need for English language skills and is rooted in a policy directed at greater social cohesion. In relation to the cooling-off period for tier 5, I think I was clear that that was driven by evidence of a small but growing misuse of that system, with people effectively here on a permanent basis. *[Interruption.]* I have been asked a straight question, and that is a straight answer.

Stuart C. McDonald: If these visa changes were introduced on the back of a consultation from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which is a devolved issue, then that consultation would have nothing to do with Scotland at all. That may be one reason why the particular circumstances that we have been speaking about have not made their way into the Home Office's thinking about these visas. That might be something the Home Office wants to reflect on for the future.

Mr Hurd: I am sure that the Immigration Minister, who will read the record of this debate closely, will want to reflect on that.

Valerie Vaz: The Minister has not touched on the issue of licences, which I raised. He mentioned that there was a small but growing problem about misuse. The whole point about the licensing system is that there were checks and balances, and that places of religion were allowed to bring their workers in under these licences, which are constantly monitored by the Home Office. What is happening to that system? Is it completely gone? Is the Minister not aware that the licensing system prevented the abuse?

Mr Hurd: Either the Immigration Minister or I will have to write to the hon. Lady on that point. I am simply stating that one of the drivers for the cooling-off period was a sense that people were effectively here on a permanent basis, which was not the intention of the original visa policy.

We have heard a lot about those who come to the UK on a temporary basis, perhaps to cover for a minister of religion while he or she is on holiday. To be clear, the

[Mr Hurd]

Government absolutely recognise that that is a legitimate activity. We certainly have no wish to leave any communities bereft of a spiritual leader while the normal incumbent has a holiday or is otherwise absent.

Remarks were made, which I thought were wildly off target, suggesting that we are targeting God or penalising the Catholic community, as if we were targeting Christian communities. These changes do not mean that we are targeting any particular group. All faiths are treated equally. Of course, we do not want communities to be bereft of spiritual leaders while the incumbent has a holiday or is otherwise absent.

That is precisely why the immigration rules for visitors specifically refer to those coming for religious purposes. Among the permitted activities for those coming on a visit visa, or for a visit without a visa if they are a relevant national, the rules state:

“Religious workers may visit the UK to preach or do pastoral work”.

This provides an opportunity for ministers of religion to officiate at a wedding or funeral, for example, and even to conduct a weekly service on an adhoc basis.

The visit rules rightly do not permit a Minister of religion to undertake paid work. If the intention is to provide cover for a holiday incumbent on a prolonged basis, which involves remuneration, we believe that the visiting Minister should have a work visa. That position is no different for a locum doctor providing cover for a GP or a supply teacher in a school, or anyone else coming to the UK on a temporary basis to provide cover for a full-time worker.

Anyone in that situation does require a tier 2 visa, as we have elaborated. It is right that those rules apply in the normal way to ministers of religion, not least because tier 2 contains an English language requirement. This ensures that visiting ministers of religion have the required level of English reflecting the important role that faith leaders play in ensuring community cohesion.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the Minister for being so generous with his time. Of course, priests are not paid. They get living expenses and a small allowance. That is very different from a salary that a doctor or teacher would receive.

Mr Hurd: I understand that point. I am just trying to set out the differences between the three different visa routes that exist, to try to help people come into the country to support religious communities.

I hope that I have set out—I do not feel I have agreement on it; clearly there is a vigorous debate and discussion to be had on this—why the Government have done what they have, and why we believe that we did consult on this matter in an appropriate way with impact assessments. If there is hard evidence of genuine

problems, of course it is incumbent on the Government and Minister to listen. It is worth reflecting that since the changes that we have discussed were made in January 2019, like for like grants are actually up by 6%, so it is clear that the Government are not seeking to restrict the practice of faith in the UK, as has been suggested—wildly, in my view.

I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East for securing this debate and for his continued interest in this vital element of life in the UK. The Government are entirely sincere in their commitment to continuing engagement on these sensitive matters.

4.25 pm

David Linden: My overwhelming feeling is that the Minister has been sent here to defend a policy that, in his heart of hearts, he probably realises is a bit of a mess. I thank hon. Members who have come today on a cross-party and interfaith basis and made a compelling argument.

I am sure that the fact that the Minister for Immigration has agreed to a meeting with faith leaders next week is not a coincidence with the timing of this debate. I and many colleagues have been writing to the Home Office about the matter since as far back as April, but miraculously we all started receiving letters only at the end of the week to tell us that that meeting would take place. That may be a coincidence; I do not know. I leave it to the Minister to decide.

It is important that people should not think that this debate affects only Scotland. It does not; our application to the Backbench Business Committee was signed by Members from right across the UK, including some very senior members of the governing party. Given the sheer number of hon. Members who have been contacted about the issue, I would like a commitment from the Minister—a simple nod of the head will be fine—that after the Minister for Immigration’s meeting with faith leaders next week, an update will be circulated to Members of Parliament.

Mr Hurd *indicated assent.*

David Linden: I see the Minister nodding. I am grateful.

We must not let go of the issue, because it is very serious and is causing great consternation in parishes right across the country. It is incumbent on all of us to stand up for those parishes and make sure that we fix this injustice.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered changes to Tier 5 Religious Worker Visas.

4.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 4 July 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Radioactive Waste: Geological Disposal

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson):

For over 60 years our country has benefited from nuclear technology. It provides clean energy to our homes and businesses and will continue to play an important role as we transition to a low carbon economy. We also have a long history of using radioactive materials to treat and diagnose serious illnesses, to deliver research and development and to help deliver industrial processes. Radioactive waste is created from a variety of sources including electricity generation, defence and healthcare. Most of this waste is low in radioactivity and is disposed of safely every day by skilled nuclear engineers across the country. However, some materials remain radioactive for thousands of years and require more specialised disposal facilities. Currently this waste is held safely in stores above ground. But this is only an interim measure, a permanent solution is needed. Geological disposal is internationally recognised as the safest and most secure means of permanently managing this type of waste.

A geological disposal facility will contribute to the Government's industrial strategy, which identified the key role the nuclear sector has in increasing productivity and driving clean growth. It is a multi-billion pound infrastructure investment and will provide skilled jobs and benefits to the community that hosts it for more than 100 years. It is likely to involve major investments in local transport facilities and other infrastructure.

I am today laying before Parliament the revised national policy statement for geological disposal infrastructure for the relevant period ending—21 sitting days post lay date—pursuant to section 9 (8) of the Planning Act 2008. At the same time, I am also laying, pursuant to section 9 (5) of the Planning Act 2008, the Government's response to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and publishing the Government response to the public consultation on the draft national policy statement.

The national policy statement for geological disposal infrastructure sets out the need for such disposal infrastructure to safely and securely manage the UK's inventory of higher activity radioactive wastes. It provides an appropriate and effective framework for the Planning Inspectorate and the Secretary of State for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to examine and make decisions on development consent applications for geological disposal infrastructure in England. The statement is based on existing Government policy for managing higher activity radioactive waste. This national policy statement sits alongside the "Working with Communities" policy document that was published in December 2018 and sets out the framework for managing this type of waste through geological disposal and the

process for how we will work with communities to find a location for this facility. That process is now under way.

A public consultation on the draft national policy statement was undertaken from 25 January 2018 to 19 April 2018 and the statement was also scrutinised by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, which considered written evidence as well as information from oral evidence sessions. I would like to thank the Committee for its very helpful report and recommendations, and also those who contributed to the subsequent debate on this issue in the House of Lords in September 2018.

The Government have considered the consultation responses and the report of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee in producing this revised version of the national policy statement.

Copies of the national policy statement for geological disposal infrastructure and Government's response to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee will be laid before Parliament. I am also publishing these documents on the Department's website, with the Government's response to the public consultation on the draft national policy statement and the equality analysis for the national policy statement.

[HCWS1688]

Consumer Contracts Regulation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Today, I am publishing the statutory report on the Objectives of Consumer Contracts (Information, Cancellations and Additional Charges) Regulations 2013. This report sets out the conclusions of the review of these regulations.

A key foundation of our modern industrial strategy is delivering a strong, transparent and attractive business environment in the UK. The strength of the UK's business environment is founded on our fair and open regulatory frameworks. For our regulatory frameworks to remain fair and open, they must meet the ever-changing needs of the modern consumer, the modern business and the modern world.

There is often an imbalance of power between businesses and consumers; these regulations were intended to empower consumers and create a fairer balance between the two. This was to be achieved by increasing transparency surrounding contracts they are entering into and give them the time to understand the product and consider its price before deciding to enter the contract, building consumer confidence and willingness to trade remotely in the process.

The regulations also implement the EU consumer rights directive, an obligation we are committed to meeting under the single market. But the UK has a strong history of protecting consumer rights, which is achieved not by the creation of new legislation and its enforcement but always seeking to understand whether, and how well, we achieve our underlying objectives. This report will set out objectives intended to be achieved by the regulations, assess the extent to which those objectives have been achieved, assess whether those objectives remain appropriate, and, if so, the extent to which they could be achieved in a way that imposes less regulation.

As part of the review, we made the call for evidence, which ran from 7 March to 1 May 2019. We are acutely aware of some of the issues highlighted by the response, such as the challenge of consistent enforcement. The Government's consumer White Paper will set out our proposals for the next phase of action to strengthen the consumer regime and will be the vehicle through which the Government consider this, and a range of other issues not addressed within this report. The Government's consumer White Paper is due to be published later this year.

Overall, it was the expressed view that the regulations continue to meet the objectives for which they were established and that these remain appropriate five years on from them coming into force. Following comments we will, however, be reviewing the existing guidance to ensure that it is sufficiently clear to support the regulations.

I will be placing a copy of the statutory report on the Objectives of Consumer Contracts (Information, Cancellations and Additional Charges) Regulations 2013 in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1691]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Response to Opposition Day Debate: Over-75s Licence Fee Concession

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): On 8 May 2019, the House debated a motion calling on the Government to guarantee the maintenance of free TV licences for over-75s beyond 2020.

The concession which was debated by the House, was introduced in 2000, and allows every person over the age of 75 in the United Kingdom access to a free TV licence. The concession was funded by the Department for Work and Pensions in full between 2000 and 2017.

In the 2015 funding settlement, the Government agreed with the BBC that Government funding for the concession would be phased out between 2018 and 2020, with control of the concession passing to the BBC from June 2020. The Government and the BBC agreed this was a fair deal for the BBC; in return, the Government committed to close the iPlayer loophole and committed to increase the licence fee in line with inflation, among other measures. The Government are clear that the future of the concession from June 2020 is the responsibility of the BBC.

Parliament made this decision and legislated to put it into effect. Transferring responsibility for the concession was debated extensively during the passage of the Digital Economy Act 2017, which was agreed by Parliament.

The BBC announced on 10 June 2019 that from June 2020 only those who are over 75 and in receipt of pension credit would continue to receive a free TV licence.

The Government are disappointed that the BBC will not protect free television licences for all viewers aged 75 and over. We recognise that television is a vital link to people of all ages, but particularly so for older people who value television as a way to stay connected with the world. That is why we have guaranteed the over-75

concession until June 2020 and that is why we believe that the BBC can do more to support older people, and why we have asked them to do so.

The debate was an opportunity to acknowledge the importance of the BBC to every licence fee payer in the UK. The BBC is one of the UK's most treasured institutions and is part of the social and economic fabric of the country. It is a world-class broadcaster and a cultural institution producing some of the best television and radio in the world.

[HCWS1692]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Windrush Generation: Compensation Scheme

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The Government deeply regret what has happened to some members of the Windrush generation and when I became Home Secretary I made clear that responding to this was a priority. The compensation scheme I launched in April is a key part of this response.

The compensation scheme has been open to receive claims since April 2019 and the Home Office is now in a position to start making payments.

Specific legislation to give direct financial authority for payments made under the scheme will be brought forward to Parliament when parliamentary time allows. In the meantime, it is lawful for the Home Office to make payments for compensation scheme claims, without specific legislative authority for this new expenditure. As Home Secretary I am able to consider other factors, including the sound policy objectives behind the scheme and the importance of righting the wrongs suffered by the Windrush generation.

I have therefore written to the permanent secretary today formally directing him, as accounting officer for the Home Office, to implement the compensation scheme for the Windrush generation and to ensure that compensation payments can be made pending the passage of the legislation. The exchange of letters relating to this direction can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/correspondence-on-the-work-of-the-home-office-windrush>. This direction has been issued on the basis of regularity.

I am committed to providing members of the Windrush generation with assurance that they will be appropriately and promptly compensated where it is shown that they have been disadvantaged by historical Government policy. A direction to proceed is therefore optimal to ensure the Government are acting in the best interests of affected members of the Windrush generation.

[HCWS1693]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council will take place on 8 July 2019 in Brussels. The deputy permanent representative to the European Union, Katrina Williams, will represent the UK.

This extraordinary meeting of the Council is held to deal with the traditional “spring package” of items relating to the EU semester, which exceptionally were not available in time for its meeting on 13 June. The Council is to approve non-binding country specific recommendations (CSRs) to member states, and it will receive a joint opinion of the Employment and Social Protection Committees assessing the 2019 CSRs and the implementation of those from 2018. The Council will also adopt guidelines for the employment policies of the member states 2019, the substance of which is rolled-forward from last year’s guidelines.

Additionally, there will be policy debates on the “economy of wellbeing” and on “employment aspects of the strategic long-term vision for a climate neutral economy”.

Under other business, the Commission will provide information on international developments in the area of social and employment policy.

[HCWS1689]

Survivor Pension Benefits

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I would like to make the following statement on behalf of myself and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss).

Supreme Court judgment in Walker v. Innospec and others

The case concerned a challenge in the Supreme Court to paragraph 18 of schedule 9 to the Equality Act 2010, which allows defined-benefit occupational pension schemes to restrict access to survivors’ benefits for survivors of a civil partnership or same-sex marriage to benefits based on accruals from December 2005 onwards. The Secretary of State was joined as an interested party. The challenge was made under EU directive 2000/78/EC (Directive establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation).

The judgment was issued on 12 July, with Mr Walker winning his appeal. The Supreme Court decided that the exception in schedule 9 should be dis-applied and that Mr Walker’s husband is entitled to Mr Walker’s death to a spouse’s pension for the whole of Mr Walker’s service, provided they remain married (Mr Walker had accrued a pension from 1980 until 2003).

The Government respect the decision of the Supreme Court. It is now clear that same-sex civil partners or spouses are entitled to survivor benefits in the same way as opposite-sex spouses.

Impact of the judgment on public service pension schemes

Following the Court ruling, the Government have decided that in public service schemes, surviving male same-sex and female same-sex spouses and civil partners of public service pension scheme members will, in the majority of cases, receive benefits equivalent to those received by widows of opposite-sex marriages. The exception to this may be in specific schemes where, in the past, improvements in female members’ survivor benefits have led to increased contributions. Departments will consult

on and take forward changes as soon as possible. Schemes will notify their members of changes and any actions they need to take.

All same-sex survivors of a public service pension scheme member will benefit from this change. How much they benefit by will be determined by a combination of factors, including when the deceased was employed, their pensionable earnings, the length of any pensionable service and the specific benefits of the scheme to which the deceased belonged.

Impact of the judgment on private pension schemes

While the Government are responsible for public service pension schemes, private sector schemes are individually responsible for ensuring that they are compliant with the judgment.

It is therefore not for the Government to direct private sector schemes in this instance, and any action taken by the Government in respect of public service pension schemes should not be interpreted as the minimum requirement for private pension schemes in considering how they respond to this judgment. These schemes will need to take their own advice to ensure that they are legally compliant with the judgment going forward.

The Government’s response to the review of survivor benefits in occupational pension schemes

During passage of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 the Government committed to undertake a review of differences in survivor benefits in occupational pension schemes. A duty to conduct this review was duly enacted in section 16 of the Act.

The review was conducted jointly by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and HM Treasury (HMT), which are the Departments with policy responsibility for private and public service pension schemes respectively, and was published on 26 June 2014.

The review considered the differences in survivor benefits in occupational pension schemes between different categories of member and the costs and other effects of eliminating those differences by the equalisation of survivor benefits. The review investigated the differences between:

same-sex survivor benefits and opposite-sex survivor benefits provided to widows;

same sex-survivor benefits and opposite-sex survivor benefits provided to widowers; and

opposite-sex survivor benefits provided to widows and opposite-sex survivor benefits provided to widowers.

The review considered the extent to which same-sex survivor benefits are provided in reliance on paragraph 18 of schedule 9 to the Equality Act 2010 and the extent to which same sex survivor benefits and opposite sex survivor benefits are calculated by reference to different periods of pensionable service.

The review further considered survivor benefits provided to same-sex civil partners and those provided to same-sex married couples. The law treats same-sex civil partners equally to same-sex married couples for the purposes of survivor benefits in pension schemes because these relationships provide comparable rights and responsibilities. There is no significant difference between them. As such, any differences in the benefits provided to survivors of same-sex civil partners when compared to same-sex

spouses would be difficult to justify. The review therefore gave no further consideration to differences between these two groups.

The review demonstrated that there are a variety of differences in treatment in survivor benefits in occupational schemes in respect of rights built up in the past. These differences reflect the change in social attitudes over the last 60 years and the subsequent introduction of new forms of legal relationships. As new groups have been brought into survivor benefit provision, changes have generally been applied prospectively to benefits built up from the point of that change.

The Government support equal treatment of survivors of all legal relationships, and Parliament provided that survivor benefits must be built up equally for all these groups on accruals from 5 December 2005 (when the Civil Partnership Act 2005 came into force).

The Walker judgment has clearly changed the legal position relating to survivor benefits in respect of same-sex unions, and the Government have acted; public service

pension schemes will now implement changes to provide that survivors of registered same-sex civil partnerships or same-sex marriage will be provided with benefits that replicate those provided to widows of opposite-sex marriages, with the exception of specific schemes where survivor benefits depend on making the correct contributions. As was made clear earlier in this statement, private pension schemes must take advice and act accordingly in complying with the judgment.

Following careful consideration of the review's findings, the Government have concluded that, aside from those changes brought about by the Supreme Court judgment, they will not make any further retrospective changes to the existing provisions in respect of occupational pension schemes to equalise survivor benefits. While this means that the differences in survivor benefits for accruals in past periods will remain for some, these will work their way out of the system in time.

[HCWS1690]

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 4 July 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ATTORNEY GENERAL	1338	DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT—continued	
Drugs Gangs.....	1341	Commercial FM Radio.....	1331
Leaving the EU.....	1342	Commercial Local Radio.....	1332
Sexual Abuse Conviction Rates.....	1343	Superfast Broadband: Rural Areas.....	1324
Unduly Lenient Sentence Scheme.....	1339	Tackling Loneliness.....	1331
Victims and Witnesses in Court.....	1338	Topical Questions.....	1334
DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	1323	TV Licences for Over-75s.....	1327
2022 Commonwealth Games.....	1333	Youth Services.....	1323
Algorithms: Inappropriate Use.....	1326	Youth Services.....	1330

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 4 July 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL		HOME DEPARTMENT	72WS
STRATEGY	69WS	Windrush Generation: Compensation Scheme.....	72WS
Consumer Contracts Regulation.....	70WS		
Radioactive Waste: Geological Disposal.....	69WS	WORK AND PENSIONS	72WS
DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	71WS	Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer	
Response to Opposition Day Debate: Over-75s		Affairs Council.....	72WS
Licence Fee Concession.....	71WS	Survivor Pension Benefits.....	73WS

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Thursday 11 July 2019**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Thursday 4 July 2019

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1323] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
Attorney General

Royal Assent to Acts passed [Col. 1347]

Serco's Role in the Justice System [Col. 1348]

Answer to urgent question—(Paul Maynard)

Social Security Claimant Deaths [Col. 1353]

Answer to urgent question—(Will Quince)

Business of the House [Col. 1360]

Statement—(Mel Stride)

Local Roads: Funding and Maintenance [Col. 1380]

Select Committee Statement—(Lilian Greenwood)

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) [Col. 1385]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Backbench Business

Sale of New Petrol and Diesel Cars and Vans [Col. 1386]

Motion agreed to

Assisted Dying [Col. 1412]

General debate

NHS Procurement and Subcontractor Exclusion [Col. 1452]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Forced Displacement in Africa [Col. 603WH]

Tier 5 Religious Worker Visas [Col. 623WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 69WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
