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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 22 July 2019

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

House Building

1. **Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the time it takes to build new homes. [912074]

19. **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the time it takes to build new homes. [912095]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): More housing was delivered across England last year than in all but one of the past 31 years. We have examined the recommendations of my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) on the build-out review, and the Government responded in full at the spring statement earlier this year with a commitment to speed up the planning system and introduce new guidance to encourage diversification.

Scott Mann: May I give the Secretary of State some feedback from architects and planners in Cornwall? The community infrastructure levy is having a detrimental impact due to not only the onerous nature of the number of forms that need to be filled out, but the fact that sites that could be deliverable are not coming forward because of the money. Will he look at that to see whether he can bring forward more sites, because we all want more houses in Cornwall?

James Brokenshire: I thank my hon. Friend for the input from Cornwall which, as he knows, is where my family hail from, so I take particular interest in it. Small developers can benefit from exemptions for self-build homes and developments of less than 100 square metres. The CIL contains flexibility and some exemptions, and we introduced guidance in July, but I will certainly listen to my hon. Friend and, indeed, other hon. Members about the community infrastructure levy.

Alex Burghart: Does the Secretary of State think that modular building methods could play a bigger role in helping us to increase the supply of housing?

James Brokenshire: I do, in short. Modular building is an essential part of our work to get speedier build out, to ensure diversification of materials, and to get skills for people. It has been good to see how housing associations and the private sector are starting to embrace it. There is more to do, but I recognise my hon. Friend's point.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is not just about how much time it takes to build a house, but about the types of houses being built. Will the Secretary of State further outline whether a scheme is in place to provide smaller apartments close to town centres for elderly widows and widowers and those with mobility issues?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman will know that housing is devolved in Northern Ireland, but I recognise the absence of an Executive and therefore the need to be able to respond to such local issues. However, our policy in relation to England is clear: we want to see diversification and we want to see that local authorities are able to meet the needs of their communities.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (IGC): If we are to tackle the housing crisis, we cannot just focus on the large developers. Small developers used to build two thirds of the new housing in this country, but that has gone away. Instead of just having the Help to Buy scheme, why not have a "help to build" scheme that supports or underwrites small and medium-sized construction companies to get rid of some of the difficulties that they encounter?

James Brokenshire: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman about ensuring that smaller builders are able to play their part, which has implications for localities and for the supply chain. Indeed, funds are available for smaller builders, but it is a challenge to see how we embody that. Councils are also able to use their new flexibilities to borrow to build, and we will continue to champion that, because the diversification that he highlights is critical.

Leasehold Properties: Mis-selling

2. **Mark Garnier** (Wyre Forest) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle the mis-selling of leasehold properties. [912075]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): I am pleased that the Competition and Markets Authority is investigating mis-selling and onerous leasehold terms and looking at whether such terms are deemed to be unfair, and we will consider further action when it reports. That work supports a strong package of reforms to promote fairness and transparency for leaseholders.

Mark Garnier: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his comments but, despite those efforts, buyers of brand-new properties in Kidderminster in my constituency still believe that they have been misled in terms of leasehold contracts and contracts relating to communal services charges on new build estates. Given that we agree that we need to increase house building significantly across the country, does the Secretary of State accept

that the apparent mis-selling must be properly investigated and brought to an end once and for all before the scandal affects millions upon millions of future homebuyers?

James Brokenshire: I absolutely do. Unfair practices in the leasehold market have no place in modern housing, and neither do, for example, excessive ground rents that exploit consumers who get nothing in return. I called on the Competition and Markets Authority to look into this issue, and I am pleased it has now responded, also reflecting the calls from the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee—I note that the Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), is in his place this afternoon.

It is right that we get to the bottom of this, that we challenge it and that we respond to these unfair practices firmly and effectively.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): When will the Secretary of State introduce regulation to give leaseholders redress? The leasehold valuation tribunal is toothless and, frankly, worthless. Whether it comes to erroneous charges, mis-selling, dangerous cladding or expensive charges, leaseholders have nowhere to go. There needs to be urgent regulation.

James Brokenshire: I recognise the hon. Lady's call, which is why we have taken a number of steps and will be bringing forward legislation to ban new leases on houses and to reduce future ground rents to zero monetary value. The Select Committee obviously highlighted the issue of existing leases as well, and we therefore now have a pledge in place and a number of people are coming forward to provide that direct response. I keep this issue under continual review as to what further steps are needed to change the situation for the future, as well as providing support for those already in this situation.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): My right hon. Friend and his team have, over the past year or so, made more progress than was made in the previous 20 years, which is greatly to be welcomed. May I ask that he continue showing the open-mindedness, flexibility and drive that are necessary to undo some of the past misdeeds, whether by declaring clauses to be unfair, and therefore unenforceable, or by finding simple, low-cost ways of righting wrongs that have been around for far too long?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. We have firmly focused on this issue of leasehold, and I know the close attention he pays to the steps that have been taken. Obviously, the Competition and Markets Authority will be looking at this issue of unfairness. In relation to the Select Committee's response, there are legal complexities with existing contracts, but I assure him that we will continue to focus on this to provide that effective response.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Hundreds of my constituents have written to me similarly feeling that they have been mis-sold their freehold, so I have written to the Competition and Markets Authority asking it to extend its inquiry to cover freehold, where people have to pay excessive and ever-escalating management and service fees. Will the Secretary of State support me in this?

James Brokenshire: I certainly support the hon. Lady in seeing that inappropriate or unfair practices are properly investigated and properly responded to. If she is willing to share with me the details of the complaints she has received from her constituents, I would be happy to look into this further.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): In my excellent recent private Member's Bill, I suggested that ground rent for leasehold properties should be set at the lower of £250 or 0.1% of the property's value. Does the Secretary of State agree with that suggestion?

Mr Speaker: It is good of the hon. Gentleman to blow his own trumpet.

James Brokenshire: I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) for his private Member's Bill setting out the steps that are needed to bring the leasehold market into an appropriate space. He will have heard what I said about bringing ground rents down to zero. We have given that commitment, and the right thing is that we move forward with our proposed legislation. I am sure that, with his ingenuity, he will be able to scrutinise it and, no doubt, come up with further proposals to ensure that legislation is effective.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): This session may be the swan song of the Secretary of State and his team. We certainly hope not, and we wish them all well in the Tory turmoil to come.

Helen Goodman: But not too well.

John Healey: Indeed.

The CMA's inquiry is certainly welcome, but it is action by Ministers that homebuyers ripped off in the leasehold system need most. The Secretary of State's predecessor said in 2017 that the Government would stop new leasehold houses, but nearly 3,500 were sold last year. The Secretary of State himself said a year ago that he would end the use of Help to Buy for new leasehold houses, but he had to admit to me afterwards that that will not happen until 2021.

As the Secretary of State reflects on his time in this job, will he concede that any Government action has been too slow and too weak and has totally overlooked the needs of current leaseholders locked into unfair contracts?

James Brokenshire: No, I do not accept that. I direct the right hon. Gentleman to the action that has been taken and the fall that has been seen: the proportion of new build leasehold houses has fallen from 11% in quarter 4 of 2017 to 2% in quarter 4 of 2018, which was the lowest quarter so far for leasehold houses in the Help to Buy equity loan scheme. The right hon. Gentleman issues a challenge on the existing Help to Buy scheme; he will have noted that I have asked Homes England to look into how we can renegotiate some of those contracts, because I was clear that there should be no new Government funding for schemes that promote leasehold, and that remains a firm commitment. Equally, we are taking action on the scheme now to confront some of the abuses that there are.

John Healey: Well, lots of warm words and fresh reviews, but no action. There have been 19 Government announcements on leaseholds in the 15 months that the

right hon. Gentleman has been Secretary of State, but there is still no sign of change for current leaseholders, or of the legislation to make it happen. Is not the hard truth that Conservatives cannot help leaseholders because they will not stand up to the vested interests in the property market? Do not homeowners who are looking for justice and radical, common-sense changes have to look to Labour to set a simple formula for people to buy their own freehold; to crack down on unfair fees and give homeowners the right to challenge high costs or poor performance from management companies; and to put an end, finally, to the broken leasehold system?

James Brokenshire: Clearly, the right hon. Gentleman has not been looking at the practical steps we have taken and, indeed, the performance that we have seen. Perhaps that is because of the turmoil in his own party—there has been plenty on the Opposition Benches. I direct the House to the steps that have been taken, the commitments that have been made and the effect that all that is now having. We are championing the cause of leaseholders and confronting some of the really unfair practices. We are seeing the effect that that is having as a result of the steps we have taken, rather than the hyperbole from the Opposition and the continuing turmoil that we see among them.

Children's Social Care Funding

3. **Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with local authority leaders on the future funding of children's social care. [912076]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): My Department regularly meets council representatives to understand the services that they deliver, including children's social care. Although the Department for Education has policy responsibility, we work closely with it and sector representatives in our spending review preparations. The Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), is meeting the hon. Gentleman this week to understand his concerns.

Luke Pollard: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Social care accounts for two thirds of Plymouth City Council's budget, and with more and more children with more and more complex needs relying on social care provision, that spending is only going to go up. It is hard to plan for rising social care costs if we have uncertainty, so will the Secretary of State set out when Plymouth City Council and other councils throughout the country will find out their allocations for 2020-21?

James Brokenshire: Obviously, the hon. Gentleman will be able to discuss this matter further with my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary; indeed, I believe that meeting will take place later today. Plymouth has seen an increase in funding this year, with a core spend of £198.4 million. The hon. Gentleman issues a challenges on the need for certainty for next year; I understand that challenge and responded to it firmly at the recent Local Government Association conference. I am working with colleagues across Government to see that we have that certainty as early as we can possibly get it. Yes, it is linked to the spending review, but we know that planning is needed, and I am championing the issue so that we get it.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): A National Audit Office report this year showed that there is huge variation between the costs of and the activities delivered by local authorities throughout the country. The same report showed that there is no link at all between per pupil funding and the quality of the services delivered, according to Ofsted. Does my right hon. Friend agree that funding alone will not sort out the problems in either children's or adult social care?

James Brokenshire: I agree with my hon. Friend and am grateful to him for highlighting the evidence that he rightly raised. We are working with the Department for Education on the review of relative needs and resources, including by jointly funding specific research on the need to spend on children's services. We want to champion good practice and to ensure that it is there to drive change and improvement in children's services. My hon. Friend is right that it is about delivery and not simply looking at the funding.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that he is working desperately hard to give certainty, but does he recognise that officials in Newcastle City Council are also desperate to ensure that the children in our city receive adequate care from next April, and they cannot do that job if they do not know how much funding will be available to support children in Newcastle?

James Brokenshire: The point that the hon. Lady makes is one that I recognise and one that I did address at the Local Government Association conference. We are approaching a spending review—a new period for the overall funding for local government—and I want to ensure that we give certainty as early as possible. That is what we are working to achieve, so the planning that she and others want for councils is absolutely what I want, too, and it is why I am doing all I can, within my powers, to see that that happens.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Northamptonshire has the second most expensive children's social services in the country and is one of the very worst performers, so it is not about money but about management and leadership. In welcoming the appointment of a Children's Commissioner, will the Secretary of State work with the Department for Education to speed up the implementation of the Children's Trust rather more quickly than is presently envisaged?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting the issue in his own area in Northamptonshire. Equally, I can say to him that I will continue to work with him and colleagues in relation to advancing this issue in terms of the reforms that are needed and implementing them speedily. I can give him the assurance that he seeks on working with colleagues at the Department for Education. Indeed, I can confirm to him that I will continue to listen to him and see that changes are implemented as effectively and quickly as we can.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): When the Secretary of State looks back on his record in the current Government, which will be his biggest regret: savage cuts to funding of children's services, or the wider impact of austerity pushing more children into needing those dwindling services in the first place?

James Brokenshire: One thing I will not regret is ensuring that I did not listen to some of the advice that I have been hearing from the Opposition. Indeed, we saw this weekend that, on the issue of the contracting out of services, their approach is effectively one that does not look at value for money or at the quality of service; it does not look at anything, it is just based on dogma. That is not our approach, which is about delivering quality services, sticking up for communities and making sure that we have well-run councils. Indeed, it is also about seeing that we are getting that funding going into social care and other services, too. That is what motivates us; that is what motivates me. I will certainly take no lessons from the Opposition.

Andrew Gwynne: I asked the right hon. Gentleman about children's services. Of course, we can see that the Secretary of State just does not get it. His cuts have had dire consequences. The Public Accounts Committee says:

"Children's social care is increasingly becoming financially unsustainable. The proportion of local authorities that overspend...increased to 91% in 2017-18."

The Tory-led LGA also says that there is a £1 billion funding gap for children's services this year. When will he understand that his sticking plaster approach will not fix the broken children's services?

James Brokenshire: Again, we hear the same from the hon. Gentleman. When I look at the real-terms increase in core spending that councils have received this year, what do I get from Labour Members—opposition to that. They did not support it. They did not support that additional funding going into social care—children's and adults'. We on the Government Benches have listened and responded. We will continue to take that forward, with the funding that has gone in over five years to support 20 local authorities to improve their social work practices, in addition to my commitment to listen to the sector and to advance its cause as we look to the spending review ahead to see that social care—children's and adults'—is effective and delivers for our councils and our communities.

Mr Speaker: Order. In calling the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), I wish her a very happy birthday.

Local Authorities' Statutory Care Duties

4. **Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the ability of each local authority to fulfil its statutory care duties by the end of the 2019-20 financial year; and if he will make a statement. [912077]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): Mr Speaker, I join you in wishing the hon. Lady a very happy birthday—what better way to spend it than at MHCLG questions.

It is the responsibility of each individual local authority to ensure that it can fulfil its statutory care duties. We have, however, supported councils to meet those duties by giving them access to several billion pounds of incremental dedicated funding for this purpose.

Mr Speaker: Birthday woman and man in a hurry.

Louise Haigh: I am very grateful for those birthday wishes, but I would be even more grateful if the Minister could agree with me that local authorities have a statutory responsibility to ensure that care workers who they have commissioned are paid the minimum wage. The all-party parliamentary group on social care has heard increasing evidence that, despite guidance issued by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, care workers are still not receiving the minimum wage because they are not paid for travel time in between their contact hours. Will the Minister give me a great birthday present by announcing that he will review the way in which care workers are paid and that he will ensure they are paid the basic statutory minimum wage?

Rishi Sunak: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important issue. It is absolutely right that those who are carrying out this vital activity in difficult circumstances get exactly what they are entitled to. I have not seen the report, but I would be delighted to take a look at it later today and to talk to my colleagues at the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care to see what we can do to take this forward.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): If I had not been sitting down, I would have fallen over when the Secretary of State talked about the injection of extra cash for local authorities. This is, of course, on top of about 40% cuts in just under a decade. Local authorities are very squeezed in delivering their statutory care responsibilities and others. Will the Minister look seriously at all the work that is being done on homelessness and community building and assess the impact of these cuts in delivering wider Government policies on prevention and ensuring that people have decent homes to live in?

Rishi Sunak: I would echo what the Secretary of State said. This talk of cuts is simply not right. The amount of money that local authorities have to spend in this financial year is up in real terms over the last year. This was reinforced by the recent Budget, where we announced over £1 billion in incremental funding for local authorities, particularly targeted at the areas of immediate pressure in adult and children's social care.

Mr Speaker: I call Dr Alan Whitehead. Not here.

Local Authorities: Adopted Local Plans

7. **Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking in relation to local authorities that do not have an adopted local plan. [912081]

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): Under the current plan-making regime, 37 local authorities have yet to adopt a local plan. Of these, 27 have submitted their draft plan for examination. We continue to monitor progress and offer support where appropriate in all these areas.

Gareth Snell: The Minister's Department is only taking action against 15 local authorities where no local plan is actively in place. The Department also has an ambitious target of 300,000 homes a year—about 80,000 a year short.

What action will he take to ensure that local authorities like Stoke-on-Trent that are failing to get a local plan in place do so quickly, so that they can develop and address this country's housing need?

Kit Malthouse: As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, we commenced a formal process of intervention in 15 local authorities to ensure that they fulfil their obligations. I have spent the last 12 months touring the country, exhorting local authorities not only to get a local plan in place, but to do so on a long-term basis so that people can see the kind of decadal-scale planning that is required to get to 300,000 homes a year. If local authorities remain sluggish in producing a plan, as the hon. Gentleman claims his local authority has been—I think that its plan is due for submission in August 2020, which does seem a little tardy—then action may be required, beyond just a stiffly-worded letter.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): When district councils do not have a local plan and a five-year land supply in place, it is villages and parishes that face the consequences of planning development. What protections will the Minister and his Department put in place for communities trying to establish neighbourhood plans, and will he reflect on his Department's recent decision to grant planning permission to two sites in Hatfield Peverel that go against the neighbourhood plan?

Kit Malthouse: My right hon. Friend, with her usual skill, puts up a stout defence on behalf of her constituents. She is quite right that protections that would otherwise exist for neighbourhood plans recede where a local plan is not in place, particularly when there is not a five-year land supply. I would point out that having a five-year land supply is not a necessary condition of having a local plan. It is possible to have one without the other, and I hope that her local authority will seek to do so. We will shortly be issuing planning guidance on plan making, wherein I hope we will include measures to strengthen neighbourhood plans, either in the absence of a local plan or where they are not co-terminus.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York has not had a local plan in place since 1954, despite being one of the worst cities for investment in economic and housing opportunities for my constituents and the council's aspiration to build 20% affordable housing but developing just 4%. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that the plan developed for York will address not only the jobs needs but the housing needs in our city?

Kit Malthouse: I have been in this job for just over 12 months, and I have developed a sense that in some way people have an expectation that I should be planning the country from my desk in Whitehall. Fundamentally, the decisions about the local plan are for the local democratically elected representatives, and they should be examined by a planning inspector to make sure that they are compliant with national planning regimes. In the end, the fundamental arbiter of the local plan in York—whether there should be one and what it should contain—is a decision for the people of York. I would urge them to vote for a council that will produce the kind of the plan to which the hon. Lady aspires.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): In relation to local plans and housing, Isle of Wight Council wants to set up a company to build council housing—I strongly support this—but says that it cannot access the necessary

funds because it does not have a housing revenue account. Does the Minister agree with that statement, and, if so, what will he do to help my council to build council housing for Islanders?

Kit Malthouse: I congratulate my hon. Friend, who works very closely with his local council in its aspiration to build more council homes. This is exactly the sort of action that we want to see from local authorities, which were, frankly, induced out of council house building by the previous Labour Government. I am aware that quite a lot of councils in this situation do not have a housing revenue account, despite our lifting the cap and enabling them to access the funding that they need. I would be more than happy to arrange for his councillors or council officials to meet my officials to determine how they could establish just such an account.

Home Ownership

8. **Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of recent trends in the level of home ownership. [912082]

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): The Government are committed to supporting people into home ownership. The most recent English housing survey saw the first rise in home ownership for 35 to 44-year-olds in over a decade. Government schemes have supported over 553,000 households to purchase a home since 2011.

Colleen Fletcher: With house prices in the region almost seven times the average annual salary, people in Coventry and the wider west midlands are struggling to get a foot on the housing ladder. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that more genuinely affordable homes are being built in the region so that home ownership is not out of reach for all but the best-paid and those with significant capital?

Kit Malthouse: May I start by saying what a pleasure it is to hear an Opposition Member who believes in the concept of private property—not something that is shared by everybody on the hon. Lady's Front Bench or, indeed, her leadership? I am pleased that she shares Conservative Members' obsession that people should have the ability to own their own homes where they want to. In the end, the solution to the problem that she poses is a massive increase in housing supply. We are committed to building 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s, not just for one year but for a series of years—perhaps for decades, if we can get there—to address this issue. In the meantime, the Government have put significant funding—billions of pounds—behind schemes such as Help to Buy to make homes more affordable. I hope that as many of her constituents as possible will avail themselves of the assistance that is there.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Ind): That is all well and good, but 30 years ago, when I bought my first house in Dudley, people were able to do so because the average cost was about three times the average income. As we have just heard, the average cost is now seven times the average income. At the same time, the number of homes for shared ownership and low-cost home ownership has fallen. So what is the Minister going to do to enable people like the ones I meet in Dudley every single week who are working hard in low-paid employment, desperate to own a home of their own, to fulfil their ambitions?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman puts his finger on an enormous problem for the country that we have not shied away from. He is quite right in pointing out that over the past three, possibly four, decades this country has failed to build the homes required by its population, and as a result we have seen unaffordability rise, particularly in London and south-east, but beyond that in the rest of the country as well. In the end, the fundamental solution is a massive increase in supply, which we are committed to. The Government have put significant resources behind lifting the number of homes being built in this country in a way that has not been seen for a generation. Last year's net new additions to the housing stock were 222,000, and the leading indicators for next year are pointing towards something over 240,000. That will represent the largest expansion in house building in this country since the war.

Homelessness

9. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce homelessness. [912084]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): We are spending more than £1.2 billion to 2020 to reduce homelessness. We have implemented the most ambitious legislative reform in decades, the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017; we are taking immediate action to begin to reduce the number of people on the street through the rough sleeping initiative; and last summer, we published our rough sleeping strategy.

Peter Aldous: Schemes such as Somewhere Safe To Stay are having success, but will the Minister take on board the feedback that I am receiving from Access Community Trust, Lowestoft Rising and the Salvation Army? They say that to eliminate homelessness, short-term one-year pilots must be turned into longer-term funding commitments and supported accommodation must be provided for those facing mental health challenges.

Mrs Wheeler: My hon. Friend is a doughty fighter for his constituency, and he never shies away from meeting the right sort of people to make a difference in his community. I have met the Salvation Army and several of the other bodies that he mentioned, and he is quite right. I recognise the importance of giving local areas security around funding, and that remains a priority for the Government. Decisions about the future of homelessness funding will be made at the spending review later this year. We were clear in the rough sleeping strategy that accommodation, alongside the right support for people with needs, is vital. That is why we are funding a range of initiatives, including the rapid rehousing pathway, through which we directly fund almost 140 areas.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Earlier this month, a young homeless woman in Forest Hill, Stefania Bada, died after contracting an infection. Since 2010, the number of rough sleepers in this country has more than doubled. There has been a steep drop in investment for new affordable homes, billions of pounds cut from housing benefit and significant cuts to services for homeless people. What immediate action will the Government take to prevent any further loss of life?

Mrs Wheeler: Any loss of life is to be pitied, and we all apologise for that. It should not happen on our streets, particularly when rough sleepers are being looked after but drug dependency is involved. If an issue happens, it is tragic. We have put in £1.2 billion up to 2020 to solve these issues, and we are not shying away from them. We now give specific support to more than 240 councils, and that is a huge jump.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): First, may I declare my interest? There are real fears that the proposed abolition of section 21 in the private rented sector will lead to rent controls and a significant reduction in investment and supply, which may well exacerbate homelessness. Will my hon. Friend consider these fears before pressing ahead with the proposals?

Mrs Wheeler: I hope my hon. Friend will excuse my back; as we all know, we talk to each other through the Speaker.

This is a very difficult issue, and one that we want to get right. People from all sides are asking questions about it, which is why the consultation is so important, and I encourage my hon. Friend and other people to take part in it. A very interesting report from 2010 suggested that rent control would make matters an awful lot worse, but the consultation is important.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Estimates of homelessness among veterans of our armed forces range from the low thousands to approximately 11,000. Why does the Minister think that the Government have failed veterans of our services?

Mrs Wheeler: As Members might imagine, as the Minister with responsibility for veterans in MHCLG, I have taken a great interest in this matter. In London, we have data from the combined homelessness and information network—so-called CHAIN data—which gives us very good and specific data about the number of veterans who are on the streets. Similarly, the homelessness case level information classification, or H-CLIC, contains data that all councils put into it. It is still experimental, because it has been going for less than 18 months, but the latest figures show that the number of veterans on the streets is lower than it has ever been, and lower than 3%.¹

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Home Office contractor Serco is intent on making 300 vulnerable asylum seekers homeless in Glasgow. Some have been able to get interim interdicts through the efforts of the Govan Law Centre, the Legal Services Agency and Latta & Co, but some, including a constituent of mine, have not. Will the Minister speak to her colleagues in the Home Office to stop these evictions, which will result in people being put on to the streets?

Mrs Wheeler: As the hon. Lady agrees, this is a devolved matter. However, as regards the Home Office, I will of course do so. I recall a question that was asked at Prime Minister's questions last week about it, and I need to refer the hon. Lady to the answer given then.

Alison Thewliss: A lot of this is not actually a devolved matter, because it is to do with the Government's hostile environment, which will make it incredibly difficult for

1. [Official Report, 5 September 2019, Vol. 664, c. 4MC.]

these 300 individuals, once made homeless, to be rehoused. That is a damning indictment on this Government. Will the Minister apologise for a policy that denies people the right to a roof of their head and is actively causing homelessness in my city of Glasgow?

Mrs Wheeler: Of course, the hon. Lady is absolutely right: this is a Home Office matter. I apologise for not explaining myself correctly before. It is a matter for the Home Office, and I will refer her question to the Home Office.

Fracking: Planning Policies

11. **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that planning policies on fracking provide for the safety of people and communities. [912087]

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): National planning policy makes it clear that, in considering planning applications, mineral planning authorities should ensure there are no unacceptable adverse impacts on the environment or on human health.

Cat Smith: Fifty seven earthquakes of up to 1.5 magnitude were detected in Lancashire last year in the two months when Cuadrilla was fracking at Preston New Road. Will the Minister commit to listening to communities such as mine in Lancashire and act in their interests to prevent permitted development rights being granted for shale gas exploration?

Kit Malthouse: As the hon. Lady will know, we have consulted on these permitted development rights. I am hopeful, once consideration by colleagues at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has finished, that we will be able to issue our response to that consultation. I would, however, point out to her that our ability to access gas allows us to stop burning coal. This country has just been through its longest period of not burning coal, by far the dirtiest of fuels, since the industrial revolution.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I hope there will not be any changes that make it easier for fracking to be permitted through the planning system. Like many of my constituents, I am deeply concerned about some of the associated impacts on the environment that come with fracking. Can the Minister assure my constituents that an industrialisation of our countryside, which is what fracking is, will be treated in the same way in the planning system as any other industrial development in open countryside would be?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend has been a persistent advocate for his constituents on this issue. As he knows, alongside the consultation on permitted development rights for exploration, we also consulted on pre-application consultation steps that may have to be taken should an application proceed. Both of those matters are under consideration by colleagues, and I hope we will be able to issue a response to them shortly.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I remind the Minister that the consultation he refers to closed last October. Twelve months ago, the Housing, Communities

and Local Government Committee did a report opposing permitted development rights and opposing transferring part of the fracking regime to the national infrastructure regime. Given the amount of opposition on his own side, as well as on this side of the House, and in local communities, is the Minister now considering withdrawing those proposals and instead giving greater powers to communities to decide whether they want fracking in their areas?

Kit Malthouse: The Chairman of the Select Committee is quite right to point out the timescale on which these measures have been under consideration, and I will certainly pass on his concerns to colleagues at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I will give the Minister another chance. Everyone—from the Royal Town Planning Institute to Friends of the Earth—has criticised the Government's plans to allow fracking to take place under permitted development, rather than by achieving planning permission, not least because it bypasses the views and concerns of local communities. Given the Government's silence on this matter since the consultation last year, will the Minister confirm today that the Government will not proceed to use permitted development for fracking and will not dilute regulations covering seismic activity—as requested by Cuadrilla, again, today—but will accept that fracking is environmentally unsound and invest more in renewable energy sources instead?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady is normally quite precise, but I should correct what she said at the start. We consulted not on fracking taking place under permitted development rights, but on exploration in advance of a full application being made for fracking. Those consultations are still under consideration by colleagues, in particular those with whom we work closely at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. I will impress upon them the House's demands this afternoon that a response be forthcoming.

Midlands Engine

12. **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to deliver economic growth through the midlands engine. [912088]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The Government are investing £1.6 billion through the nine midlands local enterprise partnerships and have established the £250 million midlands engine investment fund. Some £217 million of the local growth fund is being invested in the Black Country, and projects such as the Elite Centre for Manufacturing Skills, with Dudley College, will drive economic growth in the area.

Mike Wood: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response, but businesses and residents in my constituency are frustrated at a lack of connectivity. Does the Secretary of State agree that a priority for the midlands engine and the Government as a whole must be to invest substantially in connecting our region, whether by rail, by road or digitally?

James Brokenshire: I agree with my hon. Friend's point about connectivity, and he will know that I visited Dudley recently to hear about those issues directly. That is why £215 million of the transforming cities fund has been made available to the West Midlands Combined Authority to support extending the midlands metro tram links to Brierley Hill, enhancing accessibility across the Black Country and helping to drive growth.

Local Government Funding: Removal of Deprivation Measures

13. **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on levels of local authority service delivery of the removal of deprivation measures from the local government funding formula. [912089]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): The Government have consulted on changes to the local authority funding formula and have heard from over 300 bodies. We are in the process of digesting those responses and will of course listen carefully to what the sector has said.

Imran Hussain: I am somewhat astonished that the Secretary of State and the Minister can stand at the Dispatch Box and keep a straight face while downplaying local government cuts. My local authority, Bradford Council, has been decimated by nine years of Tory austerity, which has stripped vital services of funding and dragged hundreds of our children into poverty. Does the Minister really think that cutting funding further and devastating our communities is an example of fair funding?

Rishi Sunak: As I have already said, funding in aggregate for local authorities has gone up, but it is worth bearing in mind too that funding for the hon. Gentleman's local authority is up this year. I have noticed also that its spending power per household is higher than the average for metropolitan districts. Indeed, in Bradford's latest accounts it boasts of the area having

“Better skills, more good jobs and a growing economy”.

This Government are backing local councils to deliver for their local communities and will continue to do so.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): When will the Government review the empty homes premium, a hypothecated tax that is unfairly distributed between deprived precepting boroughs and shires? Hyndburn is about the 24th most deprived area in the country and collects about £600,000, the majority of which is given to wider Lancashire to spend, not the deprived area. This is totally unfair. Does the Minister recognise it as unfair and will he do anything about it?

Rishi Sunak: I am happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman about his specific concern, but in general it is for local authorities themselves to decide how to implement the empty homes premium. They are accountable to their electors, and this is not something that central Government have any execution over.

Developers

14. **Andrea Leadsom** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): What steps local authorities are able to take to hold to account developers that do not engage with local communities on (a) section 106 agreements and (b) other local planning matters after planning consent has been given. [912090]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Our recent reforms gave local authorities the tools to make it more difficult for developers to renegotiate contributions after planning consent. Where developers do not deliver on contributions, these can be enforced through legal proceedings. Finally, local authorities are required to consult on planning applications before consent is granted.

Andrea Leadsom: As part of a planning agreement, Persimmon is responsible for building a relief road for Towcester as part of that town's expansion in my constituency. Highways England is providing £4 million to try to bring forward delivery of the road, but that now seems to be at risk due to problems between the developer and Highways England. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss how we can work together to ensure that the road gets built?

James Brokenshire: I would be very happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss the point she makes. We want to ensure that there is a tie-up on infrastructure; the £5.5 billion housing infrastructure fund is there precisely to support that activity. On section 106 agreements, the Housing Minister and I firmly believe that transparency—publication and making them available, so there is direct accountability—is really important. I will certainly meet my right hon. Friend.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will know that over my time there have been serious problems with the non-delivery of section 106 agreements, so could we not look at them? When building houses, land tends to be cleared and trees cut down. Under a new kind of section 106 agreement, we could make developers put money into building new forests, such as the Great Northern forest and the White Rose forest.

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that how we create stronger, greener environments is a part of the delivery we firmly need, so that we have a relationship between built and natural environments. I believe very strongly in creating communities. The new planning guide, with the national planning policy framework, provides greater certainty, but we continue to review this area with an accelerated planning Green Paper later this year. If the hon. Gentleman has specific points he would like to raise on how we ensure that that sense of greenness within development is upheld, I will be very grateful to hear from him.

18. [912094] **Mr Mark Prisk** (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Developers are not the only ones who do not engage with local people. In fact, the whole way in which we consult on planning is out of date and is regarded with some scepticism by many members of the public. May I urge the Secretary of State to tackle that—not least by

putting in proper resources and extending the scope of neighbourhood planning, as his Minister referred to earlier?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting neighbourhood plans, which I believe in very strongly, and how we garner that greater consent for development to take place. I underline the sense of how we speed up the process with planning, with development and with those plans. That is what the accelerated planning Green Paper is all about. I would be delighted to continue to discuss this matter with my hon. Friend and others to ensure that we make that effective.

Topical Questions

T2. [912100] **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Just over a week ago, I visited the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany where my children's great grandfather was held by the Nazis after Kristallnacht. He was one of the lucky ones. He was able to leave Germany and be reunited with family, but millions of others were not so fortunate. The visit redoubled my determination to deliver the national holocaust memorial and learning centre.

There is a duty on all of us across the House to stand up against antisemitism, racism and bigotry. Through initiatives such as the communities framework, which we have just published, we must stand up for our shared values of openness, understanding and decency. We reaffirm those values, as we mark the centenary of the Addison Act this month, with plans to end the practice of the segregation of social housing tenants through new guidance on development to prevent people being denied access to shared facilities such as playgrounds. I will continue to champion the values of fairness that underpin my work as Secretary of State.

Tom Pursglove: What steps is my right hon. Friend's Department taking to ensure there is a co-ordinated cross-Government plan to make sure that areas with very significant housing growth, such as Corby and east Northamptonshire, receive the investment in infrastructure they need?

James Brokenshire: The £5.5 billion housing infrastructure fund is a cross-Government effort to unlock housing by supporting infrastructure development. With the Department for Transport and the Treasury, we are looking at ways to build capability across Government to make that as effective as possible. My hon. Friend is right. It is about that sense of delivery and consent, and seeing that homes are supported by the infrastructure they need.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): On Thursday, it was confirmed that high pressure laminate cladding, exactly like Grenfell-style ACM cladding, is lethal in certain combinations and must be removed from buildings. This could affect up to 1,700 additional blocks. The Secretary of State has known since last October that this cladding failed a fire test. No building should be covered with lethal materials and there are lives at stake, so I ask the Secretary of State: how many buildings are

covered in this lethal cladding? What is the deadline for the removal of that cladding? Will the Government fund its removal?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady needs to be careful about the detail of what she has said, because she will equally know that there has been a BS 8414 test in relation to high pressure laminate, with different types of insulation, where the finding was not the description that she has set out. We have provided advice in December 2017 and December 2018. We have now reaffirmed further advice to building owners to see that they take appropriate action to make buildings safe. That is what we have taken action to see and secure, and further steps are being taken with local government to test the type of materials that are in buildings. There is certainly no sense on this side of not taking the action that is required to make people safe.

T3. [912101] **Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): A number of constituents are trapped in unfair leases. What is the Minister doing to ensure that they can buy out their lease from a developer at reasonable cost?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I thank my hon. Friend for her question. We have asked the Law Commission to look at making it easier, quicker and more cost-effective for people to buy their freehold or extend their lease. It is also examining the options on reducing the premium that leaseholders must pay to do that. We look forward to its recommendations in the early part of next year.

T6. [912104] **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): A damning report from the Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government has confirmed that the £200 million set aside to fund the removal of aluminium composite material cladding from private residential buildings will not be sufficient. Will the Minister commit to funding work to ensure that all this potentially life-saving work can be carried out everywhere it is needed?

James Brokenshire: We believe that the £200 million, which was an exceptional sum, based on the extreme risk that this ACM cladding has, is sufficient to provide the necessary support to make the necessary remediation, the reason being that commitments are already in place from a number of private sector developers and builders, as well as other insurers, to see that that work is undertaken. It is on that basis that that sum has been ring-fenced.

T4. [912102] **Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Under this Government, greenhouse gas emissions have fallen by 25% since 2010, which is a considerable achievement. However, there is much more we can do to make our housing stock much more environmentally friendly. The Minister for Housing knows about this issue, because I have spoken to him about it several times in the past few weeks. Will he or the Secretary of State illustrate what we are doing to deal with it?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that. He sets out that need for improving the energy efficiency of new and existing homes—that aim is very much shared by the Housing Minister. We plan to

consult this year on uplifting the building regulations' energy-efficiency requirements for new homes and work to existing buildings. Policies are also in place to improve existing homes, and these include the energy company obligation scheme.

T7. [912105] **Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Mr S has been a brilliant private tenant for the past 12 years in his flat, always paying his rent on time, and decorating the flat and repairing it when necessary. He is also a great patriot, as a Royal Navy reservist. But none of this matters: in eight weeks, when his landlady issues him a section 21 notice, he will become homeless through no fault of his own. How is that right or fair?

James Brokenshire: We want to get this right in the private rental sector, which is why we have launched the consultation today on section 21 and how we provide that reform. If the hon. Lady wishes to draw the circumstances of this case to my attention, I will be happy to receive the details, because the sense of fairness underpins the action we are taking and is why these reforms are necessary.

T5. [912103] **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): The midlands has economic, cultural and historical ties with countries in every part of the world, but few are stronger than those with India. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on developments for a midlands engine partnership with business in India?

James Brokenshire: I am pleased to say to my hon. Friend that some further positive steps have been taken since my visit to India last October to forge those relationships between the midlands and Maharashtra in India. I hope to be able to give him some positive news very shortly on signing a memorandum of understanding to really regularise that and underpin how we ensure we have that shared expertise to create jobs, boost trade and take other steps to cement this and create that positive sense of prosperity that I know he strongly advocates.

T8. [912106] **Anneliese Dodds** (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Why has the Housing Minister not accepted the need for new primary legislation to implement the Letwin review's call for land value uplift to be properly captured? That would support social housing construction, including in areas such as Oxford.

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): We cannot wait for primary legislation; we have to get on with it now. In particular, there are lots of things in the Letwin review that can work with the grain and the weave of current planning policy. For example, we will shortly be issuing guidance on housing diversification, which is one of the key suggestions in the review. We are encouraging local authorities to introduce local plans, as the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) urged us to do, so that landowners can realise the obligations placed upon them and so that the value of community contributions and affordable housing can be factored into the land price.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Permitted development rights have damaged the economic and social fabric of Harlow, increased crime and placed intolerable burdens

on our education and social services. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said he would review them. What has happened to that review and what is the outcome?

Mrs Wheeler: I appreciate my right hon. Friend's question, having recently visited Harlow to discuss this matter with him. In the round, 42,000 homes were delivered in the three years to March 2018 under permitted development rights with a change of use from office to residential. Earlier this year we announced a review of the quality standard of homes provided through permitted development rights for the conversion of buildings to residential use. The review is expected to conclude later this year. Today, I have written to all local authorities to remind them of their responsibilities regarding out-of-borough placements.

T10. [912108] **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Funding for local welfare assistance, which replaced crisis loans, is threadbare. In Sheffield, the council has managed to retain the fund, but it has more than halved since 2014, which has left people in a desperate position and exposed to loan sharks. The Minister will know that simply identifying a notional figure within the revenue support grant is meaningless when local authority funding has been cut so heavily. Will she agree that the budget should be ring-fenced and properly funded by central Government?

Mrs Wheeler: The hon. Gentleman poses a really interesting question. I will write to him with an answer.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Currently, town and parish councils are not compensated in the council tax formula grant for providing student discounts, which means that parish councils in villages with large student populations, such as Kegworth in my constituency, are providing services used by students for which there is no precept. Will the Minister look into this inequity?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): We will take this away and look into it. My hon. Friend makes a valid point. More widely, in our communities framework, we have come forward with a plan for expanding the number of parish councils in this country to ensure they play their full part in delivering for the communities they represent.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): The Government are still allowing the use of flammable cladding on school buildings up to 18 metres high, which of course means most school buildings. A disabled child would have great difficulty getting out if there were a fire. Why won't the Government do what every parent wants and bring in a total ban on flammable cladding on schools?

James Brokenshire: I thank the hon. Gentleman for flagging this up in the way he has. I took the step to introduce the ban on combustible materials on the surface of walls of high-rise residential buildings and others. We keep this under review. The Department for Education takes the lead on some of these standards, but I will certainly impress upon it the issues he raises, because safety and security are paramount.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): What is the Department doing to make sure that Help to Buy is more accessible for those on lower incomes?

Kit Malthouse: As my hon. Friend knows, the Department spends an enormous amount of time and energy promoting Help to Buy to those who are eligible, and the new Help to Buy scheme, which will come in once the current scheme finishes, will be targeted very carefully at first-time buyers. I am more than happy to take any suggestions she may have for how we can focus it more on those on lower incomes.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): There is a £3.1 billion gap in funding for children's services and a £4.3 billion gap in funding for adult social care, but, eight months before the start of the new financial year, local authorities have no idea what their funding settlement will be for the coming financial year or beyond it. What is the Secretary of State doing to address this crisis in local government funding, which is affecting the most vulnerable residents in communities up and down the country every single day? Why is he being so complacent?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): Far from being complacent, the Government are working hard to ensure that local authorities receive the support that they need, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen). We know about the importance of children's services, and the importance of ensuring that all authorities benefit from best practice from places such as Leeds, Hertfordshire and north Yorkshire. We are funding those authorities so that they can spread that best practice throughout the country, transforming the lives of children everywhere.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I do not want to assume that Ministers have seen the letter that was sent to the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and me today by the director general for housing about the chairman of the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership and LEASE, the Leasehold Advisory Service. It deals with one issue satisfactorily. May I ask Ministers to see whether the alleged social media comments which pose a difficulty can be sent to the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform to establish whether he can overcome the second difficulty?

James Brokenshire: I will look into the matter and come back to my hon. Friend.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Representatives of nearly 50% of children's services have said that they no longer feel able to keep children

safe. Recent research has shown that private fostering, children's homes and social worker agencies have amassed an estimated annual profit of £220 million, while simultaneously costing local authorities £20 million. At what point will the Government put the needs of vulnerable children before private profit?

Rishi Sunak: It is for local authorities to decide how best to conduct children's services in their areas, and it would not be right for me to stand at the Dispatch Box and tell them exactly how to contract. I will say this, however. When it comes to protecting the most vulnerable children in our society, the Government have ensured, through the troubled families programme, that hundreds of thousands of the most vulnerable families are receiving the targeted, intensive support they need so that their children can be kept out of care and they can stay strong together.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): The crisis in adult social care is likely to become worse as it becomes harder to recruit staff from the European economic area to work in that sector post Brexit. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Home Office to ensure that the sector has access to the long-term labour supply that it will need?

James Brokenshire: I have had discussions with not just the Home Office but the Department of Health and Social Care, and we have pursued the issue with our local government delivery board, which brings together councils from across the country to ensure that such issues are well planned. We keep this issue under careful review, but I believe that councils will rise to the challenge and ensure that the services on which their communities rely will not be disrupted.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Hull is proud of its maritime history, and our relationship with the sea has shaped not only our culture and our economy, but even our character. What support and encouragement can the Minister give Hull City Council in its bid to become an official maritime city?

Jake Berry: As someone who was born and bred in the city of Liverpool, I know that the connection between coastal communities and the sea is very strong. What support and encouragement can I give? Well, having visited Hull on many occasions and having had the privilege of experiencing some of the events that took place during its city of culture year, I can say that it seems extremely well placed. I am sure that the hon. Lady, and her colleagues in the constituencies surrounding hers, will let no opportunity pass to bang the drum for Hull, its place in our nation's story as a maritime city, and its role in driving the future economy of our northern powerhouse.

Hong Kong

3.39 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Hong Kong.

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Murrison): There have been a number of developments in Hong Kong over the weekend. On Friday evening, the police seized a quantity of explosives from a warehouse in the New Territories along with knives, petrol bombs, corrosive acids and T-shirts supporting Hong Kong independence. On Saturday, there was a large rally in the area known as Central in support of the Hong Kong police. Yesterday, hundreds of thousands of people took part in a largely peaceful march on Hong Kong island; however, some protesters diverted from the approved route and there were clashes with the police, including outside the Chinese Central Government liaison office. Last night, there were disturbing scenes in the New Territories town of Yuen Long: a group armed with chains and poles attacked pro-democracy protesters and other passengers at the metro station; 45 protesters were reportedly injured, one critically. We were all shocked to see such unacceptable scenes of violence.

There has been a great deal of speculation about the identity of the group who attacked people at Yuen Long metro station, but it is important that we do not jump to conclusions on their identity until a thorough investigation has taken place. I welcome Carrie Lam's statement today saying that she has asked the commissioner of police to investigate this incident fully and pursue any law breakers. We will be keeping a close eye on this, as I know will hon. and right hon. Members.

I condemn all violent acts, but I stand by people's right to protest peacefully and lawfully. We must not let the violent actions of a few overshadow the fact that hundreds of thousands of people took part in the march yesterday and did so in a peaceful and lawful manner. In doing so, they were exercising their right to peacefully protest and stand up for their freedoms. We fully support this right, which is guaranteed under the joint declaration. Successive six-monthly reports in this House have highlighted that Hong Kong's political freedoms have been coming under increasing pressure, and the House is right to reflect this in its appetite for urgent questions, parliamentary questions and statements.

Let me assure the House that the Government remain fully committed to upholding Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy, rights and freedoms under the one country, two systems principle. They are guaranteed by the legally binding joint declaration. We will continue to be unwavering in our support for the treaty and expect our co-signatory to behave in a like manner.

Rights and freedoms and the rule of law are vital for Hong Kong's future success; for its people, we will continue to stand up and speak out.

Catherine West: I agree with the Minister that the peaceful nature of the demonstrations must be paramount. Does he agree that there has been some doubt as to the wording of the governor of Hong Kong's promise to suspend the plans around extradition, and that that

could do with some clarification? Does he also agree that huge numbers of people are taking part, which reveals a deep concern about these ongoing proposals, and is there any way that he can use his office to assist in the clarification that the extradition plans will be 100% dropped?

Obviously this month saw the 22nd anniversary of the handover of Hong Kong from Britain to Chinese rule, and the day was marked by real fear among many people in Hong Kong that the principle of one country, two systems is being reneged on. Media reports paint an alarming picture: 45 people were injured, and of significant concern is that one of those was a journalist, and there is a question over press freedoms and the fact that the police were very slow to respond.

Coupled with the escalation in violence, reports also came out this weekend that the UK Government approved an export licence for £1.9 million-worth of telecommunications interception equipment to Hong Kong. Will the Minister tell the House what human rights assessment was made before the approval of that licence given the concerns raised previously about the Hong Kong authorities' treatment of protesters during student protests in 2014, and how the Government intend to address the ongoing urgent concerns about the protests and the way they are being handled? Finally, will the Minister once more provide assurances that we stand with the people of Hong Kong in defending their democratic right to protest?

Dr Murrison: I shall start with the hon. Lady's last question, about our standing shoulder to shoulder with the people of Hong Kong in their right to protest. I know that it was a rhetorical question, but it is worth emphasising that of course this country stands shoulder to shoulder with the people of Hong Kong, as I laid out in my opening remarks. On her point about interception equipment, I could find evidence of one licence, but it was an extant licence connected to counter-narcotics, counter-trafficking, search and rescue and counter-terrorism. I would say to the hon. Lady with the greatest of respect that if you will the ends, you have to will the means. She will be familiar with the safeguards that this country has in relation to equipment that a country could use to disadvantage people internally or to pose a threat to its neighbours. They are well rehearsed, and I probably do not have time in responding to her question to rehearse them again.

The hon. Lady mentioned the governor, but I think she meant the Chief Executive. That was a Freudian slip and it is perfectly understandable that she would use that term, but it is important to understand the UK's position in all this, because we are simply a co-signatory to the Sino-British joint declaration. We cannot impose things, as was perhaps the case in the past, and neither should we. It is important to understand Hong Kong's autonomous behaviour, which we stand fully behind in accordance with the tenets of the joint agreement.

On the status of the extradition arrangements associated with Carrie Lam, I think that she has made it fairly clear that they are dead in the water. On the undertaking on one country, two systems, it of course remains our view that that is in the interests not only of Hong Kong but, I humbly suggest, of China as well. We will continue to point that out in our discourse with Beijing.

The hon. Lady rightly commented on press freedom. Of course that is at the forefront of the mind of Ministers in the FCO right now, given that we have recently hosted with Canada the media freedom conference, at which many of these issues were aired. I do not think anybody can be left in any doubt as to the position of the United Kingdom in this matter, which is four-square behind the journalists who serve us so well in articulating concerns and reflecting on world events in the manner that they do. The hon. Lady mentioned police behaviour. It is important that police behaviour in the UK or any country should be fully scrutinised. We have a proud tradition of that in this country, and we want to inculcate those norms and practices elsewhere.

In general, Hong Kong is a peaceful place with a good record for safety as a city. It has an independent judiciary who ultimately would be tasked with forming a view on whether the police have behaved appropriately, but before that, it is important that matters of concern are investigated internally, and I am pleased that the police commissioner and the Independent Police Complaints Council in Hong Kong have undertaken to do just that.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Regarding Hong Kong citizens' fundamental rights and freedoms, the Chinese Government have warned the UK to

“know its place and stop interfering”

in what is a

“purely internal affair”.

Does my right hon. Friend disagree with that assessment, and will he make that clear to the Chinese Government? Will he also make it clear to them that it is perfectly in order for parliamentarians here in the UK to engage on this issue? May I put it on record in this place, Mr Speaker, that UK parliamentarians will not be warned off doing that, no matter what warnings we receive individually?

Mr Speaker: They certainly will not be. I am aware of such efforts, as the hon. Lady knows. Such efforts to silence Members of this House are both improper and extremely ill judged, and the sooner their authors realise that, so much the better.

Dr Murrison: Indeed, and I hope that I made my views on the matter plain in my opening remarks. I agree with my hon. Friend that China and the United Kingdom are co-signatories and equally responsible for the Sino-British agreement, and we expect our co-signatory to honour it as we have done. In general, I believe that China has attempted to do that, and we will continue to impress on it the importance of that in our discourse with China, as I know the Prime Minister did in Downing Street with China's Vice Premier on 17 June.

Mr Speaker: I very much thank the Minister for what he has said.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on securing it. The situation in Hong Kong is getting more and more serious by the day. The temporary suspension of the extradition laws was never going to be enough to appease the protesters. Their demonstrations are the culmination

of years of frustration and based on the fear of interference by Beijing in Hong Kong affairs. It is time for some significant change.

Yesterday's vicious attack by a mysterious armed mob on pro-democracy protesters making their way home is a new and sickening low in this sorry chapter. It was nothing less than an attempt to bully and frighten peaceful protesters into submission. The Hong Kong police have come in for a lot of criticism since June for their heavy-handedness and brutality, but they were nowhere to be seen on this occasion, and over 40 people were injured in the attack. Why was it allowed to happen?

Our call for an independent inquiry has so far been met with a less than satisfactory response. I therefore wonder whether the Minister can update the House on the Foreign Secretary's call for an independent judge-led inquiry into the conduct of the Hong Kong police. We do not know who these people were or who put them up to it, but it is vital to find out. Does the Minister have any information as to the identity of the attackers and from where their orders came?

Dr Murrison: I share the hon. Lady's assessment of the deteriorating political situation in Hong Kong. I also share her revulsion at the scenes we saw on our television screens over the weekend. We have called for an independent inquiry, and we would like to know what the scope of such an inquiry would be. That is important, particularly since the situation is evolving. When we originally called for such an inquiry some time ago, we were presented with certain facts, and we were calling for such an inquiry on the basis of what we knew at that time. Things have changed since then, and different things have happened, and we would like such things, including the weekend's events, to form part of that inquiry.

This is a rapidly evolving piece, but we need to know to what extent the inquiry will be full, comprehensive and, as the hon. Lady is right to say, independent, which is crucial. It probably is not sufficient simply to have an internal police inquiry, which is what the IPCC would be in a Hong Kong context, and it really does need to involve Hong Kong's excellent and well-respected judiciary.

I cannot really speculate on the nature of the individuals who are responsible for last night's attacks, and it would be very premature to do so. Those things would need to be explored in any comprehensive inquiry, and the hon. Lady will understand that it would be unwise and unreasonable to speculate at this stage, although she will have seen the same press reports that I have.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Minister is absolutely right to say how much he deeply regrets the events in Tsuen Wan and Yuen Long in particular over the past couple of days. All of us who wish Hong Kong well will be dismayed at what has become the seventh consecutive weekend of protest and violence. In many ways, the proposed extradition bill has become a catalyst for deeper frustrations, and it is clear to all of us that the protesters' five demands are going to have to be addressed, at least in part. Is my right hon. Friend aware that the Hong Kong general chamber of commerce has now come out in favour of two of them—that the Hong Kong Government formally withdraw the extradition bill, even though they have acknowledged that it is

[Richard Graham]

effectively dead, and that there is a judge-led commission of inquiry into all the events? If so, does he agree that we should support such calls?

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend is an acknowledged expert in this House on Hong Kong, and the sense of his remarks is pretty spot on. On the extradition Bill being a catalyst for other things, it is a bit like uncorking a bottle. He is right to say that the Bill is important but has brought to a head wider unhappiness in relation to mounting events in Hong Kong. His judgment is spot on in that respect.

My hon. Friend asked about a judge-led commission, and our sense is that an inquiry needs to be independent, and needs to be seen to be independent by the international community. It would be wrong of me, from this Dispatch Box, to ordain the terms of reference of such an inquiry, although, as I have already said, the judiciary in Hong Kong is held in high regard and is generally regarded as being absolutely independent. One is perhaps drawn towards judicial involvement as a way of assuring the international community that these matters, in the fullness of time, will be investigated fully and comprehensively.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The juxtaposition of this question with the statement later today on the Gulf illuminates what will be an increasingly geostrategic workload for the incoming Administration. The Minister should know that the entire House supports the Government's standing up to China to ensure the rights of Hong Kongers, as guaranteed in the handover agreement, but if I may say so, previous attempts have been hindered by a lack of wider UK strategy in the Indo-Pacific region to address the weighty issues of the rise of China that our allies have been dealing with for more than a decade. Will the Minister therefore be willing, at some point, to bring forward a China strategy for debate on the Floor of the House, to stop the continual oscillation of successive UK Governments between "fill-ye-er-boots" appeasement and knee-jerk Trumpianism?

Dr Murrison: I think that is very harsh. It is clearly our endeavour to work with the Chinese Government, and it would be bonkers not to do so, wouldn't it? The hon. Gentleman is tempting me down a road that would cause all sorts of difficulties in trying to advance the human rights issues that he and I both hold dear.

We will be critical of China, if we think it appropriate, but the important thing is to insist on the tenets of the 1984 joint agreement and hold China's feet to the fire as a co-signatory. We respect that agreement, and I know China would want to respect that agreement if it wants to continue working with the UK on a range of issues and common interests. On that basis, I hope we will move forward.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the rule of law is essential to the economic stability of Hong Kong? Does he also agree that our definition of the rule of law—the definition generally understood by the international community—is not the one that China always understands?

Dr Murrison: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that working together to ensure prosperity in Hong Kong is vital. On the rule of law, we have to work with a number of systems across the world, and we need to be a little careful about insisting on a particular model. I am proud of our norms and values, and I have no difficulty in trying to inculcate them, but we have to be respectful of our partners. Particularly when engaging on human rights, we need to make it clear where we are coming from and the importance we attach to them, including when we come to strike trade deals. It is perfectly legitimate for such agreements to contain reflections on human rights, but we also have to respect our interlocutors.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): One of the people injured at Yuen Long was a journalist. Just over a week ago, the Government set up a committee to protect journalists, which is clearly very welcome. Will the Minister set out how in future the committee might be able to help journalists in Hong Kong who want to cover this matter impartially?

Dr Murrison: The right hon. Gentleman will, I hope, have admired the Foreign Secretary's personal efforts in respect of media freedom, which came to a head with the conference to which the right hon. Gentleman refers. If it was in doubt before, Britain is now widely respected around the globe as being in the lead on this matter.

On the committee to which the right hon. Gentleman refers, it would be perfectly reasonable for such a body to take a view on the treatment of journalists who had been abused. There is currently a worrying tendency around the world for journalists who are doing their very best to promote an open and transparent society and world order to be abused in the way that they sadly have been in Hong Kong recently, as they have in other parts of the world. I share the right hon. Gentleman's concerns. It is clearly up to the committee to work out how it is going to do its work, but no doubt it will take note of the particular abuse to which he refers.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Hong Kong is a peaceful place, but there is growing evidence that the Chinese Government are quite prepared to throw their weight around. If these so-called triads were indeed triads, they would not have just gone around attacking people on the station. That does not happen unless they are instructed to do so. Does the Minister share my concern for the future of the island? If this sort of thing is happening now, what is going to happen in 2047, when the island is handed back to China full-time?

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend is right to say that in 2047 the formal period covered by the Sino-British joint agreement will come to an end. The Government hope that the good practice in that agreement, which we hope will continue during the timeline of this particular agreement, will continue thereafter. In particular, we hope that the commitment to the one country, two state system, and the basic law and everything that is contained within that, including measures to further democracy beyond that which currently exists, will continue. I do not necessarily share my hon. Friend's pessimism, but there is real benefit in the special status of Hong Kong as far as China is concerned. I very much hope that if China wants Hong Kong to continue to be a place where business is done and foreign revenue is earned,

it will insist on the continuation of human rights and democracy, which underpin the uniqueness of Hong Kong to the mutual advantage of Hong Kong and mainland China.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Minister will be aware of the horrendous level of artificial intelligence-enhanced digital surveillance under which Chinese citizens, and Uyghur Muslims in particular, are obliged to live. Does he know to what extent that applies to Hong Kong and whether it contravenes elements of the Sino-British agreement? Will he confirm that whoever is the next Prime Minister and however desperate they are for a trade agreement with China, Britain will always stand up for human rights in Hong Kong and China?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Lady will forgive me if I do not comment directly on security matters.

On human rights, I hope I made it clear in my opening remarks that human rights and trade and prosperity are two sides of the same coin. I indicated that there is nothing to prevent human rights forming part of any agreement that we might have. That is not to say that any agreement would necessarily contain clauses along those lines, but there is nothing to prevent the United Kingdom from insisting, in such an agreement, on particular measures of the sort that I think she would find very acceptable.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I am pleased that the Government have suspended the licences for sending riot control equipment to Hong Kong. Are there any indications that our diplomats or, indeed, the media are being restricted in their movements on the island of Hong Kong?

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend is right to say that on 25 June my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary gave an undertaking to ensure that the material to which my hon. Friend refers would not be the subject of any UK licences. Sometimes, the material that has been sold to Hong Kong has been misunderstood. For example, both my hon. Friend and I would agree that bomb disposal equipment and body armour are perfectly reasonable things to export to Hong Kong.

On the freedom of journalists, Hong Kong has been a place within the region where, historically, there has been a free press, and it would be very disturbing if there were a significant reversal of that. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) made reference to the deteriorating political situation in Hong Kong, and, in my answer, I agreed with her—that is my assessment as well. Clearly, that would include the situation with respect to a free press, as it is difficult to see how a deterioration in the way in which journalists go about their business would, in any way, be compatible with political freedom.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Will the Minister consider referring the worsening democratic deficit in Hong Kong to the United Nations Human Rights Council?

Dr Murrison: What I would like to see is greater attention being given to articles 45 and 68 of the Basic Law—that is to say a situation where we can look forward to an election of the Chief Executive and a fully democratic Legislative Assembly. I am an optimist.

I would actually like to see democracy in Hong Kong greatly improved in the years ahead, and that has to be our ambition. Unfortunately, the events of the past few days have made that rather less likely.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Given my right hon. Friend's comments and the current situation, how has his thoughts changed on advancing democracy in Hong Kong?

Dr Murrison: As I said to the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), I am an optimist and I want to see democracy improved in Hong Kong. I would hope that China agrees that its special nature is good for China, too. It is good for Hong Kong, and it is good for China. It is good for China's prosperity. Articles 45 and 68 of the Basic Law contain within them the seeds of advancing democracy. That is why they are there and were signed up to by both the Chinese and the UK Governments in 1984. That is where I would like to see the attention focused in the years ahead, running up to the end of the Sino-British agreement. If we can move towards that, I think China will come to see that it is to its advantage, as well as to the advantage of the people of Hong Kong, that we should advance democracy further in Hong Kong rather than see it pulled back. Unfortunately, that is, as the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland said in her remarks, the trajectory that we are on at the moment.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): In light of the increasing aggressiveness of the Chinese Government, the influence that the Chinese Government have had on Hong Kong, and even the Chinese Government's condemnation of any comment by the UK Government on events in Hong Kong, many people rightly believe that the rights that they thought that they had under the joint declaration are being slowly strangled. The Minister has said that he is going to hold the Chinese Government's feet to the fire on this issue. Will he tell us in what practical ways that is being done?

Dr Murrison: The joint declaration was lodged with the United Nations: the primary cockpit of international affairs and the highest body that we can possibly lodge such an agreement with. The eyes of the international community are on China. It is true to say that, traditionally, China has been fairly reticent about making statements of the sort that the hon. Gentleman was expecting from Beijing, but I hope that I have made it clear in my remarks that we talk constantly with China, with our interlocutors; that we have a good and productive dialogue in the main with Beijing; and that we will continue to enforce the importance of that. That is the way that diplomacy is done. I am confident, because I am an optimist, that China will come to see that its interests, as well as the interests of the people of Hong Kong, are best served by preserving the one country, two systems status that was agreed in 1984.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): My right hon. Friend clearly understands the difference between protests and riots. Is he confident that the Chinese and Hong Kong Governments fully appreciate that distinction?

Dr Murrison: It is very important that institutions such as this House and Governments such as the UK Government make it very clear that we see a clear

[Dr Murrison]

distinction between a legitimate protest—which is something that we would all welcome as part of the way in which we carry out our affairs in a country such as this—and violence, bullying and subjugation of the sort that unfortunately we appear to have seen over the weekend. The two are very different, and it is important that legislatures such as this make that difference very clear indeed, as we are doing today.

Batten Disease

4.10 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State to intervene to ensure that funding is provided to treat those suffering from Batten disease.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): I thank my hon. Friend for his question; he is a great champion for his constituents. We must ensure that all children with Batten disease receive world-class care and support. The Secretary of State has met families of children who suffer from the condition and has seen at first hand how cruel the disease can be. I pay tribute to my constituent Melanie Moffatt, whose amazing care for her daughter Matilda has been truly inspiring.

The whole House will recognise that a key element of providing world-class care is getting access to the most effective new medicines. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence is the expert body, independent of the Government, that provides authoritative, evidence-based guidance for the NHS on whether new drugs and treatments represent an effective use of resources. If they do, the NHS is obliged to provide funding. In 2013, NICE introduced its highly specialised technologies programme, which supports access to drugs for very rare diseases such as Batten disease, through additional funding—up to £300,000 per quality-adjusted life year. However, companies still need to price their products appropriately and fairly. In this instance, Brineura has not been made available at a price that could be recommended by the NHS. NHS England stands ready to do a deal at a reasonable price, but this has not been possible so far. I urge BioMarin to sit down again with NICE and NHS England, as NICE has not yet published its final guidance, so that a fair and reasonable price can be agreed.

I assure the House that my Department and the NHS are working as hard as possible to improve the broader care and support for patients with rare diseases, including Batten disease. I reassure all Members that the Department is committed to ensuring that all patients with rare diseases have access to world-class medicines, care and support.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank the Minister for her response. I am grateful that she has not hidden behind sub judice on this occasion. Could she confirm to me that, while NHS England is obliged to follow a positive recommendation from NICE, it has the legal discretion not to follow a negative recommendation and can decide to pay for a drug? In the event that NHS England will not do this, what powers—if any—does the Secretary of State have to ensure that a drug is made available? If that cannot be done, in what way is NHS England accountable to Parliament for the decisions it makes, or is it entirely above accountability?

The point at issue today is that Brineura has now been available for two years and it is available in many other countries at a price that has been agreed between their authorities and BioMarin. We now know that three more children—leaving five altogether in this country, including my constituent Max—who ought to be receiving this drug are not. They suffer from a condition that means that they degenerate relatively quickly, and this

drug can stop the decline in their condition. It is therefore urgent that this matter is addressed quickly, rather than continuing to allow time to pass with sick children getting worse. It really is a most important and pressing issue. In instances where the drug companies and NHS England cannot agree, but where other countries have agreed, I wonder whether there could be any system of arbitration to determine what is a fair price, because the development of these drugs is exceptionally expensive.

Seema Kennedy: I thank my hon. Friend for his questions. I will attempt to answer all of them.

In terms of governance, no, NICE is not above accountability. Ministers set the framework for NICE, which is a non-departmental body. The reason it was established was to have fairness—so that there was no postcode lottery on access to various drugs. It is important that medical experts and scientists make these decisions rather than politicians. Regular governance meetings are held between the Department and NICE. There is a framework agreement. Where the Secretary of State considers that NICE is failing, or has failed, to discharge its functions or to do so properly, he can direct NICE to discharge functions. If NICE were to fail to comply with the Secretary of State's direction in those circumstances, he could discharge such functions himself. There is therefore a strong and robust governance system with regard to NICE.

It is not always very helpful to use other jurisdictions as a comparison because we do not know the exact price that has been agreed. In addition, different systems have different healthcare populations and do not necessarily have the equivalent of our national health service.

Turning to access to Brineura, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and to Max's family. I know from the very moving testimony by him and by other hon. Members such as the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) and from speaking to my constituent Melanie on numerous occasions that this is an absolutely dreadful disease. That is why we want the NICE process to be able to bring drugs to market as quickly as possible. Drug companies find this drug difficult to develop—that it is very expensive. It is not necessarily a drug that will be paid for by having millions of sufferers globally, and therefore a different system needs to be in place. That is why the bar for QALY is so much higher.

My hon. Friend's suggestion on arbitration is very interesting, and I will take it away. On NHS England and the negative procedure, yes, in theory we could do that, but it is unlikely if NICE does not recommend a process. Overall, where a drugs company and NICE are unable to come to an agreement—we see this with other medication as well—Ministers urge the company to carry on negotiating to have a fair price, because every pound spent on one drug is a pound that we cannot spend on a drug for another sick person.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I thank and congratulate the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) for securing it following his Adjournment debate last week. I do not doubt that he would have preferred the Minister to have come before the House voluntarily, rather than being forced to come here today for his urgent question.

Time and again, we come to this place to talk about a drug and its benefits to patients, only to be told that no matter how good it is, people cannot access it on the NHS. Among all the politics, there are people, including children like Max, who are suffering. No parent wants to hear a critical diagnosis for their child who has not yet really experienced childhood, let alone reached adulthood.

As we have heard, Brineura, a drug made available by BioMarin, could stop the progression of Batten disease. An assessment by NICE has found that Brineura could provide 30 extra years of good-quality life to patients. But, as has become expected when we discuss drugs for rare diseases in this place, Brineura is not available for patients on the NHS. NICE confirmed earlier this year that it was unable to recommend the use of Brineura on the NHS because of cost-effectiveness. The drug costs over £500,000 per person for each year's treatment. BioMarin has another drug for rare diseases—Kuvan, for patients with phenylketonuria, or PKU. PKU patients do not have access to Kuvan, because it is also deemed not to be cost-effective. Does the Minister agree that the NICE appraisal process is just not fit for purpose when it comes to assessing the suitability of drugs and treatments for rare diseases?

Access to Brineura would help to give patients and families their child back, and it would allow them to enjoy time with their child and treasure special moments with them. As time ticks on without access to the drug, parents will witness their child's condition deteriorate. No parent wants to see that, so we really need an appraisal process that captures rare diseases effectively.

Will the Minister step in and personally urge BioMarin, NHS England and NICE to meet and come to an agreement? Families do not just want warm words from the Minister; they want and need access to medicines now. I hope that this urgent question will result in real change in how we address rare diseases.

Seema Kennedy: In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), I urged BioMarin to get back around the table with NHSE and NICE and come to a fair and reasonable price. NICE has already approved drugs for 75% of rare diseases through its technology appraisal programme, including drugs for idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis and neuroblastoma. NICE's process and review methods are constantly reviewed, and they are internationally respected. NICE knows that it has to keep up to date with developments in science, medicine and healthcare. There is a periodic review going on at the moment, and that includes extensive engagement with stakeholders.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): I thank the Minister for coming today and providing more information. On Friday, I met the parents of Michal, one of my constituents. Michal is four years old, and he was diagnosed with Batten in February. He has already lost almost all his ability to walk and speak, and his parents are desperate to get him access to this drug.

I understand what the Minister says about it not always being helpful to compare access to drugs in different countries, but this drug is available in 20 countries, including Wales. If Michal lived in Bangor rather than Burton, he would be getting the drug that could stop the progression of this disease now. It is simply not acceptable to say, "Let's not compare what happens

[Andrew Griffiths]

here with what happens in other parts of this country, the United Kingdom,” and we need to know more about that.

The Minister talks about her desire to get BioMarin around the table. Time is of the essence for these children—every single day matters when it comes to stopping this disease in its tracks—so will she agree to pick up the phone to BioMarin and personally ask it to come around the table to negotiate with NICE? If Wales can afford to give children this drug, the Minister must have an idea about the scale of the difference between what we can afford to pay in England, and what Wales is paying. We have to find a solution to make this drug available to parents and children here in England.

Seema Kennedy: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and to the parents of Michal. This dreadful disease is so upsetting, not only for the children affected and their families, but for their wider communities. Health care in Wales is devolved. I again urge BioMarin to get back round the table, but I reassure my hon. Friend that I will make contact with the chief executive of NHS England to make sure that he is taking forward negotiations with BioMarin—he is the negotiating party—and I will let my hon. Friend know when I have done so.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I thank the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) for securing it. The families of children with Batten disease have been left dangling for far too long, and the delay in a positive decision being arrived at—for what is a really obvious use of NHS funding, if we were to ask any taxpayer out there—is just too painful for many of them to bear. The stress and anxiety they are being caused is completely unacceptable.

The Minister acknowledges that this is a dreadful disease, but it is a dreadful disease that has a treatment—a highly effective treatment. It does not just score 30 QALYs; it has been acknowledged that it scores way beyond that. NHS England is adhering to an arbitrary cap set by NICE. Will the Minister please confirm whether NHS England can use a budget exemption in these circumstances to deal with the very tiny number of children who are affected, and what will she do practically—and what has she done since last week—not just to urge but to get BioMarin round the table with NHS England and NICE to get a positive outcome for these families and these children?

Seema Kennedy: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I know that she has spoken to me and spoken in this House about Nicole and Jessica Rich. I agree that it is a highly effective treatment, but NICE sets the guidelines because it is made up of the independent experts and they are the ones responsible for the number of QALYs. However, as I have already said, it is constantly reviewing its guidelines in the light of the best available evidence. I have already reassured the House that I will make sure that I make contact with NHS England so that it is driving forward the process with BioMarin.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I have looked after a number of children with Batten disease in my career, and no one should underestimate

the horrific nature of this condition with which a child develops apparently normally and then gets the horrific diagnosis that they will suffer neurodegeneration. I completely respect the importance of NICE being independent, and in general I do not get involved in these debates, but I believe I should do so in this one, because I actually think that NICE has this wrong. This drug does not make a little bit of difference—it does not have the effect of making someone die a couple of weeks later; it makes a phenomenal difference to the quality of life for these children. Yes, the trials have been short so far, but over a reasonable period it makes a massive difference, and I think we should do everything we can. I have heard the Minister say that she will ask the chief executive of NHS England to get BioMarin back round the table. How long will she give him to achieve that, and if he does not succeed, what will she herself do to ensure that these children get these drugs as soon as possible?

Seema Kennedy: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all the work she has done as a clinician. I can only say again—I know this is very disappointing for the House—that we have to rely on the NICE process to be independent. I hear what the House is saying with how some people having doubts about the process, but, again, it is under review. NICE is internationally respected, and it has been going for 20 years. Yes, these are exceptionally difficult cases, but this is why, as custodians of NHS funds, we have to be very careful, because every pound we spend on one drug is a pound we cannot spend on another. I hear what my hon. Friend says about this being a life-changing drug, and I hope that BioMarin, NHSE and NICE will, and we would urge them to, carry on with their negotiations.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): There can be very few things as painful for a parent as knowing, once their child has been diagnosed, that there is potential treatment out there that may make a radical difference to their life, and it will feel as though some bureaucrats—whether or not they are medical bureaucrats—are saying no. These little things in my hand, which would not have been prescribed for me if I had gone to the doctor a year ago, now cost £7,000 a month to the NHS, and I am delighted that I am able to receive them. However, I do want to make sure we have a proper system to ensure, for the most rare conditions, that there really is a possibility of making things available.

There may only be three dozen cases in the UK at the moment, which means there are probably about 900 in Europe, and if we include the Commonwealth, probably several thousand more. Why do we not have Governments in the world sitting round the table together with people from the pharmaceutical companies, who are not the baddies in this—these are the people, I think including the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), whose investment made these pills available for me, in part; investment in these pharmaceutical companies is a good thing—to make sure that more of these rare disease conditions can be treated?

Seema Kennedy: We are determined to improve treatments for people living with rare diseases. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, they have to be treated differently because fewer people are affected by them. We have the rare diseases strategy, and we are trying to

use genomics to better diagnose and treat diseases. We are trying to be the first health service to put genomics into day-to-day health delivery, which will enable us to diagnose and treat diseases such as Batten more quickly. We have care co-ordinators for patients with rare diseases and we are trying to ensure that those who live to adulthood are cared for better, but what the hon. Gentleman said about having an international approach is valid.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): The Minister rightly speaks about NICE's important role in eliminating postcode lotteries. Does she agree that NICE's independence is vital to ensuring availability to patients once an agreement is reached with BioMarin, wherever those patients are from, whether Penwortham in her constituency or Pensnett in mine?

Seema Kennedy: I could not have put it better myself.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) made the point about international co-operation, which already exists. A European agency examining the treatment of rare diseases was established in January. It is funded by €101 million and the UK is currently a participant. My question for the Minister is: will we still be in the event of withdrawal after 31 October?

Seema Kennedy: There will be co-operation with other medicines agencies, and I have no doubt that future co-operation will also come under any agreement that we reach with our European partners following our withdrawal from the European Union.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Sadly, this is not the first time that we have been here discussing how to make a highly specialised drug available for people generally and the discussions with companies. May I add my request to my hon. Friend to act urgently to ensure that the review of NICE is undertaken with speed and that the full range of appropriate stakeholders is included in the discussions to take NICE forward?

Seema Kennedy: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I have answered debates here and in Westminster Hall about the medical treatments for rare diseases. To reassure both patients and their families and Members of this place, we need to ensure that the review of NICE processes is robust and transparent.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Less than half of all available rare disease treatments licensed by the European Medicines Agency are reimbursed in the UK for patients to access freely through the NHS, compared with 93% in Germany and 81% in France. With respect, Minister, the parents of those young children with Batten disease have seen those figures as well. They are desperate for the medication for their loved ones, so will she agree to an urgent review of the funding for such treatments for UK citizens?

Seema Kennedy: We are putting record amounts of funding into the NHS, but I would rest again on the independence of the NICE process and the fact that it is

experts and clinicians who are making these decisions. I agree that these are dreadful decisions and it is very hard for us to make them, which is why we rely on that expert advice. I would say to the hon. Gentleman that other jurisdictions are not always a good comparison.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) for securing this urgent question.

Will the Minister, while working to secure the funding of the drug Brineura to help sufferers of Batten disease such as my young constituent Kaycee Bradshaw, look at how we can help to prevent companies such as BioMarin charging extortionate fees for life-changing drugs? Sadly, this company also charges beyond the NICE framework for Kuvan, a vital drug needed by my young constituent Liam, who suffers from PKU. BioMarin made a net-product revenue increase for 2018 of \$31.3 million from Brineura and \$26.1 million from Kuvan, and \$1.5 billion from across its range of drugs. This, by my standards, is a clear example of playing profits with people's lives. It hurts even more that it is children who are suffering. It is not on. It is time that Governments got together and took heed. We do not know what other countries are paying. It might be less than our £300,000 or it might not, but something must happen. Get together and put the pressure on, but please, please secure these drugs for our children.

Seema Kennedy: I pay tribute to Kaycee and Liam. The hon. Lady makes a very important point. We want pharmaceutical companies to develop their medicines here, so that they are brought to the market here first and our constituents have access to them. However, we also have an obligation to spend taxpayers' money in a very fair way, so that every penny we spend is done so correctly and appropriately. When it comes to PKU, Orkambi or Brineura, what we are all—NHS England and all of us here—saying to the drug companies is that we will pay a price, but we want it to be a fair price.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Earlier in this Parliament, I supported a young constituent of mine in securing access to Brineura. Health is a devolved matter in Wales, but the NICE recommendations are still very important. The problem I have seen over the past four years, unfortunately, is that those guidelines do not work particularly well when a disease is extremely rare. Does the Minister plan to look again and review the guidelines, so that people are not penalised simply because the condition they have is rare?

Seema Kennedy: Right hon. and hon. Members have made clear to me their concerns about the NICE process for rare diseases. A review is ongoing, and I will keep a very close eye on it.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and to the Minister. I have a sense that we will very likely be returning to this matter in September, if not before.

Pensions for Severely Disabled Victims (Northern Ireland)

4.37 pm

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the eligibility criteria for the pension for severely injured victims.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): I am delighted to have the opportunity to respond to this urgent question and to clear up some worrying misconceptions that have been circulating over the weekend. Before I do, the more observant here today will have noticed that I am not the Secretary of State. She is currently at Stormont, where discussions are ongoing. I am sure we all wish those discussions every success.

I am happy to confirm that it remains the Government's position that, while it is right and proper to provide a pension for victims of troubles-related terrorist incidents, it should not become a pension for terrorists. There is no moral equivalence between a bystander badly injured in a terrorist explosion through no fault of their own, and the people who manufactured the bomb, placed the bomb and detonated the bomb. I therefore happily confirm to the House that under the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill, which we debated last week and the week before that, if the Stormont Executive is not reformed by 21 October we will bring forward regulations to ensure a victims' payment scheme is in place in Northern Ireland by the end of May next year. The eligibility for the scheme will reflect the basic principle I have just outlined.

There will be many important and sensitive details to be worked out. We will do that in discussion with the Northern Ireland political parties as the regulations are written and developed, but the foundations will be as I have described. I am delighted to have the opportunity to put that on the record here today.

Emma Little Pengelly: First, let me thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this urgent question—it is very much appreciated. I can, with confidence, extend the thanks of the many, many victims in Northern Ireland, who were deeply distressed by the recommendation over the course of last week and the weekend. It proposed that the person who went out to murder, maim and cause hurt would also be eligible for this pension if in the course of doing so they injured themselves.

Sadly, an appalling moral corruption lies at the heart of victims-related issues in Northern Ireland: the repugnant proposition that equates a victim with their victim makers. The hallmark of any peace process should be how we treat our victims. Sadly, too often—time and time again—victims are being asked to compromise; in order to get much-needed help and support, they have to facilitate and allow those victim makers to get it also. That is fundamentally wrong.

Many challenging and difficult issues relate to the legacy in Northern Ireland, but we must never lose sight of what is right and what is clearly wrong. Therefore, I warmly welcome the clear statement from the Minister today that eligibility for this special pension will not extend to those victim makers—those terrorists who

planted the bombs. This has caused deep distress for many, many years, particularly during the last week. Will the Minister outline when those people will be excluded? What immediate next steps is he intending to take to bring in this much-needed pension swiftly, and give those victims and survivors the help they need?

John Penrose: First, I am delighted to hear that we are so strongly on the same wavelength. I refer not just to the hon. Lady and myself; as she rightly pointed out, this is a widely shared view on all sides of the community, both in Northern Ireland and, more broadly, right the way across the UK. I am glad that we are in the same place on this issue.

The hon. Lady asked about the timetable. Their lordships are considering the final stages of the Bill and so, technically, it has not quite cleared Parliament yet. Once it does and it is law, we will, in effect, work backwards from the due date at the end of May—it will then be laid out in statute—with, if necessary, a series of discussions, consultations and whatever it may be in order to get the necessary regulations in place in time. In the meantime, we will be making sure we have time to have conversations properly and carefully on these extremely sensitive, carefully approached issues, which will need to be addressed in order to get this right.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that the proposed pension scheme for victims is not and never will be a pension scheme for terrorists?

John Penrose: Yes, I am delighted to say that as often as necessary, as it bears repeating and needs to be put on the record. I am delighted to have the opportunity to say it to my hon. Friend, too.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): May I tell the Minister that he did not fool any of us? We recognised the fact that he is not the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I profoundly hope that he survives what may be something of a *Götterdämmerung* later this week, because he has been a first-class Minister. I think I speak for the House when I say that we very much hope that he is in place after les événements of this week.

I do not want to over-congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly)—I do not want to blight her career too much—but, not for the first time, may I say that I thank her for bringing this matter to the attention of the House? I must also thank you, Mr Speaker. As you know, the hon. Lady raised a point of order last week and you indicated, as only you can, that the door was open and had but to be entered. We now see the proof of that. I hope you will allow me in passing to congratulate the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) on the brilliant British Open in his constituency; I also congratulate Shane Lowry. The rain rather reminded me of high summer in Donegal at one stage, but the Open was superb and it showed Northern Ireland in such an excellent light. The more people who realise what a marvellous place it is to visit, the better.

I am very much with the Minister on this: we absolutely have to put down a marker on this issue once and for all. The point is that when we are dealing with issues of victims and the potential duality of some standards, it is almost like being in an egg-and-spoon race: we have

to advance very slowly, very delicately and very carefully, because the potential for disaster is very high. I therefore state irrefragably, absolutely undeniably and completely without any possibility of misinterpretation, that the Opposition do not wish to see any change in the definition of a victim as outlined in the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006—unless, of course, there is agreement from the Northern Ireland political leaders. Legacy issues are decided on in consultation with Northern Ireland political leaders and are legislated for in Westminster.

The Opposition have long been in favour of a pension for seriously injured victims and survivors of troubles-related incidents. We do not believe in compensating the victim makers—it is important that we get that on the record once and for all. The victims and survivors pension hub is intended as recognition of the damage done to lives and livelihoods and not as a service to be accessed. The current definition of a victim was intended for use in application to services—originally for services such as healthcare, and latterly to the victims and survivors service.

If a system could be put in place through legislation in Westminster that would provide a pension to those who have been injured—in some cases, as far back as the 1970s—and exclude those who are injured by their own hand, we would support that, and we think that there is a need for more definition. If it does not mean changing the definition of access to services, we, as a civilised society, should provide for all those who are in need. For that reason, the Labour Front-Bench team put forward an amendment that sought legislation but did not prescribe the form that it would take—mainly to try to get the amendment within the scope of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill.

Reference has been made to the House of Lords. The noble Lord Hain, a former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, moved an amendment to the Bill in the upper House that I think defines the issue even more closely. Will the Minister address the four salient points contained in Lord Hain's amendment? He referred to the regulations under subsection (1), which must make provision as to the eligibility criteria, particularly relating to the

“the nature or extent of a person's injury...how, when or where the injury was sustained...residence or nationality...whether or not a person has been convicted of an offence.”

We are as one on this issue. We want to support and give aid and succour to those who, through no fault of their own, have suffered what are very often life-changing injuries. They deserve better from this House and they will get better from both sides of it. We do not believe in pampering the victim makers.

John Penrose: I am delighted that the Opposition Front-Bench team support the broad principle, which I have just enunciated, and that we are of a very similar mind on this. That is extremely welcome news and I thank them for that.

I confirm that the four criteria that the hon. Gentleman read out from the new clause about victims' payments are absolutely central to the process of working through the details about how we do the definition of who will be eligible for the new payment scheme. That will be the way in which we deliver on the central principle, which I hope I outlined very clearly in my opening comments: making sure that this is not a pension for terrorists.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Will the Minister ensure that the “through no fault of their own” principle that he has set out specifically excludes those who were engaged in terrorist acts from receiving support, such as this pension?

John Penrose: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Very well done.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Well, one does not want to upset the leader of the Democratic Unionist party—I call Mr Nigel Dodds.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Thank you very much indeed, Mr Speaker—I appreciate that very much. I welcome very warmly what the Minister and the shadow Minister said in the House today and the consensus that there is on this issue. I pay tribute to the many victims, including Michelle Williamson, who lost both her parents in the Shankhill bombing in October 1993, when nine innocent people were murdered on the Shankhill Road. The bomber who injured himself in planting that bomb would be eligible if this action was not taken to disqualify terrorist perpetrators.

Will the Minister join me in thanking all those victims and victims' organisations that have worked together to bring about a pension for victims and to make sure that the eligibility criteria are right and proper? Would he also care to comment on the Victims' Commissioner's position? While there is a consensus here, she appears out of step with many victims' groups and victims. Does that call into question her position? In a letter in today's press in Northern Ireland, many victims' groups have called into question her position on this issue.

John Penrose: I certainly join the right hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the unstinting and determined work done by victims' groups over many years to get us to where we are today. We are not there yet of course—we have to get this done by the end of next May, so there is more work to be done. But we are at least within sight; we are on the final lap, I hope, and I am sure that he and other Northern Ireland politicians will wish to reflect those views very carefully in the upcoming discussions.

On the comments of the Victims' Commissioner, she has suffered, I think, the full force of many people's wrath over the last few days. I am pleased that she has issued a clarificatory statement, which is very important, in which she says:

“I am acutely aware of the perception that this scheme is somehow drawing moral equivalence between victims and perpetrators. That is not the case”.

It was vital that she clarified that point. I will leave her to answer her critics herself more broadly, but it was very good to hear her express that central point so clearly.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Ah, the deputy leader and knight of Lagan Valley, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

[*Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson*]

One reason why we are discussing this issue is that 21 years ago in the Belfast agreement, signed on Good Friday 1998, sadly not enough was done to deal with the legacy of our troubled past. Will the Minister assure us that whatever happens—we hope for a restoration of devolved government as soon as possible—the Government will proceed with implementing the legacy proposals, subject to whatever changes arise from the consultation, so that we can get on with dealing with these issues and so that victims can have access to proper investigations into the murders that occurred during the troubles?

John Penrose: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the issue of the legacy of the troubles goes much wider than the specific point about the victims' pension and that therefore there are other issues that have not been dealt with through the EFEF Act. He will be aware, because he and I have spoken about it elsewhere, that the Government have just published a digest of the responses to the rather large consultation—there were 17,000 responses—on the proposals for how the broader legacy issues might be dealt with, and in due course the Government will need to set out their response on how to take that broader canvas forward. He is absolutely right that those other issues are not going away and need to be addressed promptly.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): If you had called me earlier, Mr Speaker, and upset the leader, I would not have cared at all.

I thank the Minister for his clarification, which will come as an immense relief to many people in Northern Ireland, but can I push him a little further? Some of those involved in terrorist activity now claim that because of what happened to them—they might have been incarcerated, questioned by the police, had raids on their homes—they have suffered depression and a mental illness that qualifies them for a pension. Can he assure us that not just those who have injured themselves physically as a result of their involvement in terrorist activity but those who claim to have suffered mental illness because of such involvement will not qualify?

John Penrose: The right hon. Gentleman raises a broader and very important point, which is that, for victims who will qualify to begin with, it is important that we agree and understand that there are valid and very serious conditions that can be non-physical. We would not want to exclude victims who have ended up with a mental illness after being injured through no fault of their own. We should not exclude non-physical injuries from our calculation of how severely someone is injured and therefore of whether they are eligible. He is also right about the flipside. When we are working out who to exclude from the definition—in order to prevent this from becoming a pension for terrorists—mental illnesses and non-physical injuries need to be included in that half of the definition as well.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his principled and precise words. He has recognised that if the institutions are restored, the amendments will fall. If the institutions are restored, however, the issue will not go away. The principle still needs to run through whatever proposals emerge, be they in Belfast for Northern Ireland-based victims or in Great Britain for Great Britain-based victims. Will the Minister commit himself to ensuring that, come what may, the principle he has outlined—that we will support victims but not victim makers—will hold true?

John Penrose: Let me take the hon. Gentleman back to the point made by the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), who pointed out that there were four criteria under the Act that would apply and which we would need to work through in order to deliver the central principle that I—and, now, the hon. Gentleman as well—have enunciated. Those four criteria include not just the question of how, when or where the injury was sustained—for example, the question of whether or not we should be including people who were injured in the Canary Wharf bombings in London—but residence or nationality. Both those issues are clearly factors, and they are on the face of the Bill, so, as the hon. Gentleman rightly says, they will not go away. They must be addressed, and they will be addressed as we work through the detailed process between now and the end of May.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Should innocent casualties and far-from-innocent paramilitaries be treated in the same way? The answer is “No, never.” The Minister has said that, and 14 of the victims' groups have said the very same thing, which is very much at odds with what has been said by the Victims' Commissioner. One of those groups, Decorum NI, represents many of my constituents.

Will the Minister come with me to meet some of the victims and their families at some time in the future—provided that he is still in place, as I hope he will be? They tell me, and I state today, that a definition that equates victims with perpetrators is tantamount to spitting on the graves of those who were murdered, salting the wounds of those who are living with physical impairments inflicted by terrorists, and mentally torturing those who have emotional scars after being the true victims of convicted murderers and evil terrorists, who can never be viewed on the same level or in the same capacity.

I welcome the Minister's comments, but I also want to ensure that we keep true to them.

John Penrose: I thank the hon. Gentleman and others who have been kind enough to express a hope that I will continue in my post. I am bathing in the love. It was very kind of the hon. Gentleman, and of course, if I am still in place, I shall be delighted to come and meet the group that he described.

Situation in the Gulf

4.58 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): With permission, I will make a statement about the situation in the Gulf.

At approximately 4 pm UK time on Friday, Iranian forces intercepted the British-flagged tanker *Stena Impero* in the strait of Hormuz. The ship was surrounded by four fast boats from the Revolutionary Guard, supported by one helicopter. Iranian footage showed masked gunmen in desert camouflage descending from the helicopter on to the deck of the *Stena Impero*. HMS *Montrose*, a Royal Navy Type 23 frigate currently deployed in the Gulf, tried to come to the tanker's aid. She repeatedly warned the Iranians by radio that their actions were illegal, but HMS *Montrose* was unable to reach the scene in time. Nine days earlier she had successfully intercepted an attempt to board another tanker, *British Heritage*, but this time she was not given the notice of passage requested that would have allowed her to reach the scene more quickly. That, however, in no way excuses the illegal actions of the intruders, who took control of *Stena Impero* and compelled her to steer towards the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas, where she is now being held.

The tanker had a crew of 23 from various countries including India, the Philippines, Russia and Latvia. No Britons were on board, and there are no reports of any injuries. The vessel's owners have confirmed that *Stena Impero* was exercising her legal right of transit passage when she was intercepted. She was passing through the strait of Hormuz in the westbound traffic lane inside Omani territorial waters, in full compliance with international law and the rules of navigation, and the tanker's automatic identification system was switched on and her position was publicly available. So let us be absolutely clear: under international law, Iran had no right to obstruct the ship's passage, let alone board her. It was therefore an act of state piracy that the House will have no hesitation in condemning.

Even more worryingly, this incident was a flagrant breach of the principle of free navigation on which the global trading system and world economy ultimately depend. I therefore urge Iran to release the *Stena Impero* and her crew and observe the rules that safeguard commercial shipping and that benefit Iran as much as any other country.

Iran has tried to present this as a tit-for-tat incident following the Government of Gibraltar's action on 4 July to enforce EU sanctions by preventing the Iranian chartered tanker *Grace 1* from supplying oil to Syria, but there is simply no comparison between Iran's illegal seizure of a vessel inside a recognised shipping lane where the *Stena Impero* had every right to be and the enforcement of EU sanctions against a tanker that had freely navigated into the waters of a British overseas territory.

Since 4 July, we have made strenuous efforts to resolve the *Grace 1* issue. On 13 July I spoke by phone to the Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, and also made clear in public that we would be content with the release of *Grace 1* if there were sufficient guarantees that the oil would not go to any entities sanctioned by the EU. But instead of responding constructively, Iran chose to

seize the *Stena Impero*, so we must now take appropriate action to support the safe passage of vessels through the strait of Hormuz.

As well as speaking again to my Iranian counterpart, I have also spoken this weekend and today to the Foreign Ministers of Oman, the United States, France, Germany, Italy, Finland, Spain and Denmark. COBRA meetings were held this morning and throughout the weekend, and the chargé d'affaires at the Iranian embassy in London was summoned to the Foreign Office on Saturday to receive a formal protest.

I can today update the House on further action we are taking. First, the Department for Transport has raised the security level for British-flagged shipping to level 3, advising against all passage in Iranian waters and, for the moment, in the entire strait of Hormuz.

Secondly, because freedom of navigation is a vital interest of every nation, we will now seek to put together a European-led maritime protection mission to support safe passage of both crew and cargo in this vital region. We have had constructive discussions with a number of countries in the last 48 hours, and will discuss later this week the best way to complement this with recent US proposals in this area. The new force will be focused on free navigation, bearing in mind that one fifth of the world's oil, a quarter of its liquefied natural gas and trade worth half a trillion dollars pass through the strait of Hormuz every year. It will not be part of the US maximum pressure policy on Iran, because we remain committed to preserving the Iran nuclear agreement.

Thirdly, while we will seek to establish this mission as quickly as possible, the Government have in the meantime dispatched HMS *Duncan*, a Type 45 destroyer, to take over from HMS *Montrose*, and she will arrive in the region by 29 July—a week from today. Fourthly, we will ask all British-flagged ships to give us notice of any intention to pass through the strait of Hormuz, to enable us to offer the best protection we can. We will then advise them of the safest way to transit, which may involve travelling in convoy. Finally, we are strengthening measures to protect ships flying the flags of other countries but which have British crew on board.

About 1,300 ships appear on the UK ship register". The combined British red ensign fleet is the ninth largest in the world, and on an average day two or three ships belonging to the red ensign group pass through the strait of Hormuz. The Gulf spans an area of nearly 100,000 square miles, and HMS *Montrose* covers an operating area of some 19,000 nautical miles. So far, she has escorted 30 merchant vessels through the strait of Hormuz during 17 separate transits, travelling 4,800 nautical miles in the process. It is not possible for the Royal Navy to provide escorts for every single ship, or indeed to eliminate all risks of piracy, but those risks can be substantially reduced if commercial shipping companies co-operate fully with instructions from the Department of Transport, which we strongly encourage them to do.

These changes—both short and medium-term—are made possible because of the commitment that this Government have already made to increase our security presence in the Gulf, including the opening in April last year of the first permanent British naval facility in the Gulf for over 40 years. This establishment in Bahrain now hosts HMS *Montrose*, along with four mine countermeasure vessels and one supply ship.

[Mr Jeremy Hunt]

Finally, let me say that it is with a heavy heart that we are announcing this increased international presence in the Gulf, because the focus of our diplomacy has been on de-escalating tensions in the hope that such changes would not be necessary. We do not seek confrontation with Iran. We have taken every available opportunity to reduce misunderstanding while standing by our rock-solid commitment to the international rule of law, which is the foundation of global peace and prosperity. However, we must react to the world around us as it is, not as we would wish it to be, so if Iran continues on this dangerous path, it must accept that the price will be a larger western military presence in the waters along its coastline, not because we wish to increase tensions but simply because freedom of navigation is a principle that Britain and its allies will always defend. I commend this statement to the House.

5.6 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for giving me advance sight of his statement. Let me start by passing on the apologies of the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), that she cannot be here to respond herself, but as many will know, she is still at home recovering from the injuries she received after being knocked off her bike on Friday. I am sure that we all wish her well.

May I also take this opportunity to pay tribute to the outgoing Minister for Europe and the Americas, the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan)? He has served the Foreign Office with diligence and distinction in bad times and good, and he can certainly be forgiven for feeling that the bad times are about to return. We thank him for the spirit in which he engaged in our parliamentary debates and we look forward to his continuing to make those contributions from the Back Benches. I would also like to add that, in the unfortunate event that this is the Foreign Secretary's final appearance in his current role, we thank him too for the welcome change in tone and the very welcome change in work ethic that he has brought to that great office of state, not least on the issue of Iran, which we are discussing today.

Iran's actions in recent weeks in the strait of Hormuz have been utterly unacceptable and should be condemned from all sides. Our thoughts, first and foremost, are with the 23 crew members on board the *Stena Impero*, and of course their families, who are facing this period of concern and uncertainty. We all know why these events have been taking place. Just like in the tanker war in the 1980s, a simple and ruthless logic is being applied by the Iranian hard-liners who are now in the ascendancy in Tehran, just as they were 30 years ago. That logic simply says, "If you try and stop our oil supplies, we will stop yours." This escalation of tit-for-tat rhetoric and action has been sadly predictable and to some extent inevitable since the United States walked away from the Iran nuclear deal and reimposed sanctions not limited to the US but in theory applying to any company or country that continues to deal with Iran. I say "in theory" because, as we all know, countries such as China that are powerful enough to ignore the Trump Administration's demands have continued to import oil and gas from Iran while Washington turns a blind eye.

This brings us to the specific issue of the seizure of the *Grace 1* oil tanker and the unacceptable retaliatory action that Iran has taken against *Stena Impero*. We know from the Spanish newspaper *El País* that the US told the Madrid Government 48 hours in advance that *Grace 1* was headed for the Iberian peninsula, which could also explain why, 36 hours in advance, the Gibraltar Government introduced new legislation to shore up the legal basis for the seizure taking place in their waters. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm whether the US was also the source of our information regarding the tanker's course, whether the US Administration asked us to seize it, and whether their primary basis for that request was that the tanker's destination was Syria or that its origin was Iran? If it is correct that we knew a full two days in advance that the action was going to be taken, why on earth, a full seventeen days later, was a British-flagged tanker left so hopelessly unprotected in the strait of Hormuz? Anyone with any understanding of the issue could see exactly how the Iranians would respond to the seizure of their own tanker. When the measures the Foreign Secretary has announced today, which are welcome, could have been put in place a full 20 days before now, why were the Government's eyes so patently off the crystal ball?

While I would like the Foreign Secretary to go into more practical detail about how the Government plan to resolve the *Grace 1*-*Stena Impero* impasse, we must also address the wider question: how do we de-escalate the tension with Iran, stop this tit-for-tat cycle of actions, and get the nuclear deal back on track? We need to use the deal as the foundation, which it previously promised to be, for addressing all the other concerns we have about Iran, not least the continued detention of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and other British dual nationals.

Setting aside the need to enforce sanctions, with which we wholeheartedly agree, against the Assad regime, will the Foreign Secretary tell us what the Government are doing to persuade the Trump Administration to drop their sanctions against Iran? Those sanctions breach the international agreement that we, the US and other countries worked so hard to achieve and have given the hard-liners in Tehran the excuse they have always craved to return to the strategy of isolation and aggression and to breach the terms of the nuclear agreement. That agreement is one of the great diplomatic achievements of the current century, and we must all strive to get it back on track before this escalation of tension reaches the point of no return.

Mr Hunt: First of all, those on the Government Benches wholeheartedly endorse what the shadow Minister said about the shadow Foreign Secretary, whom we wish every success in having a rapid recovery after her unfortunate bicycle accident. I also thank him for his generous comments about my time as Foreign Secretary—without any sting in the tail. I particularly want to thank him for carefully comparing me to my predecessor after 5 o'clock, which was when the leadership contest for the Conservative party closed, because it might not have helped me if people thought that he thought I was a better Foreign Secretary. I also add my thanks for the brilliant service to British diplomacy of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), who was an outstanding Foreign Office Minister. He will be greatly missed inside King Charles Street—but not for long if tomorrow's result is the upset that I am hoping for!

Let me turn to the substance of what the shadow Minister said. On the detention of *Grace 1* by the Gibraltar authorities, I want to be absolutely clear that the United Kingdom did not endorse that detention by the Gibraltar authorities because of a request by the US. We did it because it was transiting oil through the waters of a British overseas territory in contravention of EU sanctions against Syria. We have been absolutely clear that our issue was with the destination of that oil, which was President Assad's regime, because a fundamental objective of British foreign policy has been to ensure that we redraw the international red lines against the use of chemical weapons, which Assad has so tragically broken.

That is also why we have sought to de-escalate the situation by making it clear to the Iranians that, whatever our disagreements with that regime, we would support the release of the tanker if we could receive guarantees that that oil was not going to Syria. We made that offer in public as well as in private, so that they would know we were absolutely serious.

There has been a huge amount of work since the detention happened on 4 July and, on the security side, the Ministry of Defence has been extremely active: officials have been posted at the Department for Transport, HMS *Duncan* has been dispatched, the threat level has been raised to level 3 and the activity of HMS *Montrose* has been enhanced. In recent days HMS *Montrose* has done 17 transits with 30 vessels, including 16 flying the red ensign; the *Wildcat* helicopters have flown for 26 hours; and the FCO has been doing a huge amount to try to de-escalate the situation, including calls to my Iranian counterpart, my US counterpart Mike Pompeo and the Chief Minister of Gibraltar. I also met the Chief Minister of Gibraltar and the French Foreign Minister, among many others, at the Foreign Affairs Council on 15 July.

A lot of things have been happening but, on the substantive point raised by the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), it is important if we are to de-escalate the situation that we do not conflate what happened in Gibraltar and what happened to the *Stena Impero* with the joint comprehensive plan of action and our approach to the Iran nuclear deal, which is different from the approach taken by the Trump Administration.

On most foreign policy issues we are absolutely at one with the United States, which we consider to be our closest ally. Indeed, the alliance with the United States has been the foundation of global peace and prosperity since the second world war. We have a difference of opinion on this issue, but we are absolutely clear that, when it comes to freedom of navigation, there can be no compromise, which is why the solution we propose to the House this afternoon is one that brings in a much broader alliance of countries, including countries that, like us, have a different approach to the Iran nuclear deal.

The Iranians must understand that there will be no compromise on freedom of navigation in the strait of Hormuz, which is essential to the global economy and to global freedom of navigation. This country will not blink in that respect.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome what my right hon. Friend has said. There is no question but that it is the Iranians, not the British, who have caused this problem. Any linking of this would therefore be quite wrong, and I commend him for what he said on that.

I want to ask a very simple question, and it may be one that my right hon. Friend is unable to answer at this point. We have known for some time that there is a heightened problem in the Gulf and that our strongest ally is there with some force. Why did we not request or agree with the United States that in the interim, while we get the right resources in place, it acts in concert with us to protect some of our shipping, as it has said it could have done?

Mr Hunt: I always listen to my right hon. Friend very carefully on all defence matters, and I reassure him that throughout this period we have had close behind-the-scenes discussions with the United States on how we can improve maritime security. HMS *Montrose's* 17 transit missions would not have been possible without US logistical support. Indeed, the United States has made a proposal on how we could enhance maritime security more generally. The US asked us to contribute to a maritime force on 24 June, which became a formal request on 30 June, and it formally briefed NATO allies and the Washington diplomatic corps on the proposal last Thursday and last Friday. We will be talking to the US about it later this week.

We think what the United States is saying is helpful and important, and we will seek to co-ordinate any European efforts on freedom of navigation with anything the US does, but we want the UK's contribution to be to make that coalition as broad as possible.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I wish the shadow Foreign Secretary a speedy recovery. I also congratulate the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) on her election as the new Liberal Democrat leader, and I look forward to continuing to work with her in opposing this Tory Government

I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. I also thank him for the diligence and seriousness that he, unlike his predecessor, has brought to this role—it is 20 minutes past 5, but I am not sure that comment would have swung it for him, regardless of when I said it. I thank him nevertheless.

I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) for his work. We have not always agreed, but I thank him for his collegiality. Where we have agreed, we have been able to work together. This is not a great time for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to be falling apart, but I entirely sympathise with the reasons he has set out today.

Iran's actions are completely unacceptable. Along with the jailing of the innocent mum, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, that should tell us all what kind of regime we are dealing with. Regardless of who holds the post of Foreign Secretary in the coming days, they must be fully on top of their brief when it comes to Iran, and we must have a full complement of staff in the Foreign Office who are able to speak frankly on Iran. The damage done by the Foreign Secretary's predecessor has illustrated what happens when one is not fully briefed when dealing with Iran.

Right now, there is a need for engagement, cool heads and a multilateral approach, and I am glad to see the start of that with the Foreign Secretary's statement today. Will he set out what talks he is having with our partners, over and above the ones he has already set out, and in

[Stephen Gethins]

particular along the lines of what is happening with the Iran nuclear deal? That is a critical piece of work that will need to be done. There are concerns that this Administration have taken their eye off the ball, and certainly that the UK has been ill prepared. Will the Foreign Secretary set out in a bit more detail why this situation was not foreseen and what actions he is taking to look at it again? This is a dangerous situation and there must be a clear understanding of what is going on, alongside the work to look into ways to de-escalate the situation.

Finally, Northern Marine is headquartered in Clydebank in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), who has been working incredibly hard on this matter. I hope the Foreign Office will continue to co-operate with my hon. Friend. We are thinking about the families of those affected at Northern Marine. I thank the naval personnel, particularly those on HMS Montrose, for their service.

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He gives me the chance to say that as a member of a naval family I lived for a couple of years in Rosyth, so I, too, along with everyone on the Government Benches, thank the naval officers and their families for the great courage and service that they are showing to our country at a very challenging and worrying time.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. We understand from Richard Ratcliffe, Nazanin's husband, that she has been moved back to Evin prison in Tehran. We think that is a positive sign. It sounds like the way that she was detained for a week without any access to her family was totally unacceptable and, I am afraid, all too predictable from the Iranian regime. The hon. Gentleman will understand that I am seeking not to make any link between these broader military and security issues and the situation that Nazanin faces, because I do not think that would help to get Nazanin home, but I know that the whole House is absolutely clear that, whatever disagreements we have with Iran, an innocent woman must not be the victim. She must be allowed to come home.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Iran nuclear deal. This is an area where the Trump Administration have a genuine and honest difference of opinion with us, because it is not a perfect deal. It was a deal that allowed sanctions relief for Iran but did not prevent Iran from supporting its proxies in Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Iraq. It allowed Iran to carry on destabilising the region, which was why the Trump Administration took the course that they did. However, given that four years ago Iran was 18 months away from acquiring a nuclear weapon, we feel it is a huge diplomatic achievement that Iran does not have a nuclear weapon today. The middle east would have been much more dangerous had it acquired a nuclear weapon, which is why we are seeking to preserve the deal. We are being clear to the Iranians that the recent breach of the uranium enrichment levels is not acceptable, but we are giving them the space to bring themselves back into compliance with the JCPOA before we formally pull the plug on it. We hope that they will do so.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that both the supply of oil to Syria and the capture of a British-flagged tanker are criminal acts for which Iran cannot be excused, and that they require the more robust response that he has now announced to the House, including the policing of an international waterway by a multinational taskforce? In view of what he has just said, does my right hon. Friend agree that whatever view one takes of the American Administration's course of action over the joint agreement, it would not make sense to exclude the American navy from participation in that multinational taskforce?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend speaks with enormous experience on these matters because of his own background as Defence Secretary. I can assure him that we would not exclude, or seek to exclude, the American navy because it has a vital role in, for example, the refuelling of our own ships, the communication system, the command and control system and, indeed, the intelligence support. We would always operate in partnership with our American allies in these situations whatever difference of opinion we might have on the Iran nuclear deal.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Back in June, the Government's view was that naval escorts for ships passing through the Strait of Hormuz would not be appropriate because it would be seen as provocative and escalatory. Therefore, I very much welcome the announcement that the Foreign Secretary has made today in response to Iran's seizure of the Stena Impero and his announcement of a proposal for a European-led force, which is a reminder to the whole House of the benefits of European co-operation. We have a very good example of another anti-piracy operation in Operation Atalanta, which has been very successful off the east coast of Africa. Will he tell the House how quickly he expects this mission to be established, and will it have sufficient resources to protect all the ships, which we now know are vulnerable, as they pass through the Strait of Hormuz?

Mr Hunt: I can give the right hon. Gentleman a little bit of the answer to that, which is that it will not be a sudden switching on and off. There will be a gradual build-up of presence, because it takes time for ships to get to the region from all over the world. HMS Duncan will arrive on 29 July, or possibly even before that, as the first step in this process, but we are having substantive discussions later this week with allies from across the world in which things such as the timescales will become a lot clearer. I would be happy to write to him after that.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I entirely support what the Foreign Secretary has said and the actions that he intends to take. May I ask him three particular points? The Strait of Hormuz must be the most overflowed and monitored sea area in the entire world, and I would be grateful, therefore, for these answers. First, when did the Stena Impero leave Fujairah? Secondly, what time was HMS Montrose first alerted to her passage? Finally, what advice did the Stena ship seek of the British Government before she sailed?

Mr Hunt: On the first question, I will write to my right hon. Friend, because I do not have to hand the exact time and date that the Stena Impero left Fujairah. The warning that HMS Montrose had was 60 minutes,

which was not long enough. We ask all shipowners to give us at least 24 hours' notice. We did not get it in this case, but that does not excuse a criminal act of piracy. We do hope now that all shipowners will co-operate fully in giving us the notice that we need to give them the protection that we are able to give.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I hear what the Foreign Secretary has said about not linking the situation in Hormuz with that of my constituent Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, but with the best will in the world he must be aware that the Iranians have previously used my constituent as a bargaining chip. He must also be aware that, only last week, the supreme leader promised retribution for the dispute over Grace 1. As the Foreign Secretary said, Nazanin has been transferred to prison after a week in the mental health hospital where she was handcuffed to her bed and guarded by someone who was armed. Her ward was sealed off and she was not allowed any contact with her family. She was then transferred back to prison. Will the Foreign Secretary reassure me that he is taking proper steps to ensure that this situation does not mean that my constituent's chances of freedom are ended and that she will be returning back to West Hampstead with her family?

Mr Hunt: May I take this opportunity to thank the hon. Lady for her very diligent campaigning for the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe? I was trying to be very careful with my words just now to say that I always try to avoid linkage between the two cases because, inevitably with a country such as Iran, our relations go up and down; and I would never want an innocent woman to suffer as a result of the ebb and flow of those relations. Of course, I cannot guarantee that Iran does not seek to make that link itself, and it would be completely wrong of it to do so.

I am afraid that the stories that the hon. Lady tells me about the conditions under which Nazanin has been detained are stories that I have heard and they are totally shocking. We hoped—and I think the hon. Lady probably hoped—that it might be good news that Nazanin was being transferred to a hospital for help with certain medical conditions, but it now looks like that was not the case. That is extremely shocking. I reassure her that I bring up Nazanin's case every time I talk to Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif; I talk about it in as much detail as I am able, because I want him to know that we will never, ever forget the fate of even one British national who is treated the way that Nazanin is being treated.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) for his extraordinary work and companionship in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office over so many years.

It is absolutely correct to concentrate on recent events, and it must be right to ensure the safe passage of ships through the Gulf and to ensure that Iran must face up to its responsibilities, but does the Secretary of State agree that there is no doubt that this is just the latest symptom of the long-running issue between Iran and its neighbours? Does he also agree that the situation surrounding the discussions over the nuclear deal were arguably even more serious than those today, because the pressure was on to seek a nuclear weapon and somehow the negotiations found a way to establish a relationship

that de-escalated that situation? If that was the case, what does my right hon. Friend think might be the trigger to start those negotiations again? The links are all there in Tehran, and we need to recognise that it is vital to deal with the cause as well as the symptoms.

Mr Hunt: We have a plethora of distinguished former FCO Ministers on the Back Benches today. I am just grateful that the Work and Pensions Secretary and the Defence Secretary are on the Front Bench, otherwise I might be a bit lonely.

My right hon. Friend speaks with a lot of wisdom and experience of relations with Iran. One of the issues that he navigated extremely successfully during his time in the FCO was the fact that we feel like we are talking to two different groups of people: the Government of Iran and the Foreign Minister, who are usually quite reasonable when we talk to them; and then the people we never get to talk to, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, who are always kept at a distance.

It is tempting to say that there is no point talking to the Foreign Ministry in Iran because it does not have any influence over the Government. But that is also wrong, because it has access that we do not have and it can present a more moderate case. That is why we continue with these contacts. The best hope that we have is the fact that Foreign Minister Zarif proposed a basis on which to restart negotiations with the United States for a different version of the nuclear deal. That was rejected by the United States, but I think that the fact that that language has started to emerge in the last couple of weeks is a sign that there is some hope of a negotiated end.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): First, may I pass on my best wishes to the shadow Foreign Secretary? As a cyclist myself, I know how vulnerable cyclists are in London. May I also apologise for the absence of my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), who has been detained by a leadership contest announcement in which she has been elected as the leader of the Liberal Democrats. I am very pleased that that has not required any Liberal Democrats to resign—other Members may regret that—in the way in which the leadership of the Conservative party has required some very sensible Ministers such as the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the right hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), to resign their positions.

In relation to Iran, it is clearly time for cool heads. I very much welcome the fact that we have the current Foreign Secretary in post and he has made it clear that we are not up for military action. Does he think that discussions now need to take place about the composition and size of our fleet? Does he agree that although we are not in an actual war with Iran, we are clearly in a propaganda war? Is he able to say a little bit about what the Government are going to do to counter the image that the Iranians are portraying of the ship perhaps going off course and colliding with another vessel?

Mr Speaker: I am pleased that the right hon. Gentleman is so pleased that none of his 11 parliamentary colleagues, himself and the successful leader included, has resigned. I know he is very happy about that, and I am very happy to join in his happiness for himself.

Mr Hunt: Let me take this opportunity to congratulate the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) on her election as Liberal Democrat leader. I look forward to having cordial relations with her as a fellow party leader if I am successful tomorrow in the election.

With regard to the right hon. Gentleman's point about the war of words on news, this was actually one of the times when the Iranians did not really bother to pretend that they were peddling a myth about the cause of the seizure of *Stena Impero*. They changed their story three times in the space of about 24 hours, and are not making any pretence at all that in their view this is a tit-for-tat seizure. That is why we have to be very clear about the difference between a legal detention of a ship with oil bound for Syria versus this wholly illegal act of state piracy.

Mr Speaker: It is right and typically gracious of the Foreign Secretary that he congratulated the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) on her election, and I myself do so. I wish her every possible success in the important work that she now has to undertake.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary accept that the taking of hostages and the flouting of international law has been the signature strategy of Iran ever since the Islamic revolution in 1979? If he does accept that, was it not entirely predictable—and, indeed, predicted—that by impounding this Iranian ship, however legally justified that was, the consequence would be an attempt to retaliate by grabbing a British vessel? What consideration was given, before the original decision was taken, to the adequacy of the number of ships in the Gulf, either ours or those of our allies? What attempts were made to persuade vessels that had to navigate the strait that they should do so in small convoys, which would at least enable two, or at most three, frigates to protect a larger number of ships? Sailing independently and separately meant that one or more were bound to be seized.

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend is right: we did foresee that this could be one of the reactions from the Iranian Government. That is why we took a number of steps after the detention in Gibraltar on 4 July, including the despatch of HMS *Duncan* and a lot of extra activity from HMS *Montrose* over the past few days in escorting 30 vessels, a number of which were British-flagged. There has been a lot of additional activity, but we wanted to do it in a way that was not a red rag to a bull and did not end up with even bigger consequences than the ones we faced, and that gave diplomatic channels a chance to work. I think that it was right to start in that way, but regrettably Iran has not chosen to follow the path that we hoped, and so that is why we are taking much more robust action today.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I share the Foreign Secretary's concerns about the possibility that tensions will escalate and that the region may descend into conflict. That is why it is so important that we are clear about the legality of the decision to detain the *Grace 1*. Can I press him on two points? Will he tell us a little more about the legal basis? Carl Bildt, co-chair of the European Council on Foreign Relations, as the Foreign Secretary will know, has described it as intriguing? Is the Foreign Secretary confident that we, as a country,

and the European Union, as a union, are consistently applying the European Union sanctions against Syria—as we should? I agree with them, but are we consistently applying them so that there is no room for Foreign Secretary Zarif to call into question our motives?

Mr Hunt: Those were intelligent questions, and I will try to do justice to them. As I understand it, it is a requirement of EU law that if a load destined, in breach of sanctions, for somewhere that should not be receiving cargo goes through an EU port or EU waters, we have an obligation to seize that cargo. That is a matter of international law, and that is what has happened. Foreign Minister Zarif tries to argue that, unlike the United States, we do not support extraterritoriality in the application of sanctions. But that was not what happened in this case, because the ship sailed into Gibraltar waters. One could argue that our actions would not have been consistent for us had the ship been seized outside Gibraltar waters, but it was inside.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Iran is going unpunished, is it not?

Mr Hunt: Commendably brief—and the answer to that question is no, because I do not think that Iran can possibly want an increased western naval presence in the strait of Hormuz, which is right in its backyard. That is the consequence of what it has decided to do with the *Stena Impero*.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and for his service in his current role. I thank him for the way in which he has carried out those duties, and not only on the big international set-piece occasions; I know of his own deeply personal and intense commitment to the welfare of UK citizens across the world, particularly those who have been detained—not just the high-profile cases, either. The latest incident by Iran comes, as he mentioned, amid the destabilising influence of Iran in the middle east and elsewhere, and its support for terrorist proxies. What are the UK Government doing, along with allies, to get to grips with Iran, its approach to the rule of international law and everything else that it is doing?

Mr Hunt: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the generous way in which he asked his question. Precisely because of that destabilising approach to many parts of the most dangerous and unstable region in the world, although we do not agree with the US approach to the Iran nuclear deal, we do try to support the US in every way when it asks us to help—for example, in checking the activities of Hezbollah in Lebanon. We have proscribed Hezbollah in this country, because we do think that it is a terrorist organisation, and we have to recognise that in British law.

The same is true of the work that we do with the American military in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Our approach to Yemen has been to try to separate the Houthis from their Iranian paymasters. Although we might not agree with the tactics, it is important that we recognise that in the United States strategic approach, the long-term solution in the region is for Iran to cease that destabilising activity.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): The Kingdom of Bahrain generously hosts HMS Jufair, the base from which HMS Montrose and other royal naval vessels operate. Its role in the Gulf is crucial, and in recent years Bahrain has been subject to destabilisation by the Iranian regime. Will my right hon. Friend take the opportunity today to acknowledge the value that this country places on the support that it receives from Bahrain, and the obligations it owes to that country?

Mr Hunt: I am very happy to do that. We have a memorandum of understanding with the Kingdom of Bahrain, and we are incredibly grateful for the support that Bahrain gives us in hosting HMS Jufair. In fact, that is the first permanent naval presence we have had in the middle east since 1935, so opening it last year was a very big step.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I, too, warmly commend the work of the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), although I think it is a bit over the top to resign from office just to avoid appearing before the Foreign Affairs Committee tomorrow afternoon.

On a serious point, the UK's position on Iran has always been subtly different from that of the United States of America, even though it is our closest ally. It is partly because of our historical relations with ancient Persia, but, more importantly, even on the night that George Bush declared Iran a member of the axis of evil, we were actually trying to send an ambassador to Tehran for the first time for many years, and the American position ended up suppering that. Just how can we make sure, in the coming months, that while we maintain our strong alliance with the United States of America, we still maintain our independence of thought in relation to Iran?

Mr Hunt: That is a very fair question. The truth is that we have to do that by being very frank with the Trump Administration when we disagree with them and about why we disagree with them. I think that, under the surface, the positions are a bit closer than they might look in the simple sense that I have actually had a number of conversations with President Trump himself about his concerns about what would happen if that region became nuclearised. I do not think the United States is indifferent to the nuclear threat in that region, and they have started to talk a lot about that recently. We use our influence, I suppose in private circles, as much as we can to try to get a meeting of minds.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I am sure we all agree that our elite Royal Navy forces, our Royal Marines, which are known to be the best in the world, should be commended for taking their role in enforcing these EU sanctions seriously and effectively. However, it does surprise me, since the Iranians made it clear that there would be tit-for-tat retaliation for our blocking tanker Grace 1, that we have not yet seen other EU navies coming to our Royal Navy's assistance in policing the strait of Hormuz for commercial shipping. Will the Foreign Secretary give the House more information on when we will see such burden sharing from our EU allies?

Mr Hunt: What my hon. Friend says is close to my heart, as the son of a naval officer, a phrase I have been known to use in the last few weeks one or two times—*[Interruption]*—and as an entrepreneur, but that is not perhaps relevant to this afternoon's statement.

My hon. Friend makes a very important point. The Defence Secretary has been talking to the Defence Ministers of France, the Netherlands, Norway and others about more burden sharing within the EU. The reason why we have constructed the proposal that we have in the way that we have today is precisely because we are trying to encourage more European involvement in maritime security, because it is in the European interest.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): While the world witnesses the horror of this dangerous 3D, real-life game of battleships, may I relay to the Foreign Secretary—he may be more than that by this time tomorrow—the concerns of my Iranian diaspora constituents? Their relatives and nearest and dearest are caught up in this, such as the children unable to access vital medicines due to the sanctions imposed by Trump and Bolton in vengeance because they do not like their predecessors. May I urge him to do all he can and all in his power to condemn and rectify these cruel hardships suffered by ordinary Iranians on the ground, as well as to carry out his decisive actions on the high seas?

Mr Hunt: I commend the hon. Lady for staying in touch with the Iranian diaspora in this country, who remind us that at their heart many Iranians fundamentally do understand our values and want to find a way to accommodate Iran in the modern world. Iran is a great country and a great civilisation, and we ought to be able to find a way to resolve our differences. However, there is the particular issue at the heart of it—I discussed this with the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), the parliamentary leader of the Democratic Unionist party, just now—which is its support for destabilising activity across the middle east, which is already the most dangerous region in the world, and that is the thing we have to address if we are going to solve this.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Given that the risk of seizure was foreseen and that 95% of goods entering the UK do so by sea, does the Foreign Secretary agree that a Royal Navy of fewer than 20 ships is not up to the task and that we need to spend more on our defence, because no matter how capable a ship, it cannot be in more than one place at a time?

Mr Hunt: I might be straying slightly from my brief as Foreign Secretary, but it will not surprise my hon. Friend to know that I am support increased spending on our armed forces. We have to recognise that we had in many ways a golden period after the fall of the Berlin wall, when there was a peace dividend and we were able to reduce defence spending, but now we have to recognise that there are increased dangers in the world, both in the middle east and because Russia has become much more aggressive than it was previously. I think that the Navy in particular has become too small, so I hope that whoever the next Prime Minister is will reflect carefully on what we can do to bolster our great Royal Navy.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The United Kingdom is home to somewhere between 50,000 and 70,000 Iranian nationals and their immediate families, many of whom are here because of their opposition to either the current regime or its equally oppressive predecessors. In the current climate of extreme intolerance, what are the Government doing to ensure that those Iranian nationals,

[Peter Grant]

who are here legally and are innocent of any crime, are not victimised or targeted because of the crimes committed by the Government that they have escaped from?

Mr Hunt: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will let us and particularly the Home Office and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government know if he comes across any examples of that, because those Iranian nationals—the vast majority of them have now become British citizens—are extremely welcome and make a tremendous contribution to our country.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's prescient remarks in recent weeks about the need to expand our naval presence. To help with that, will he ask the Defence Secretary to change the classification of our much-valued Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships to warships, as our allies classify them, so that we can bring forward the building of planned new ships in the UK?

Mr Hunt: I have just asked the Defence Secretary that very question, to which the answer is yes.¹

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I agree with what the Secretary of State has said about the importance of freedom of navigation, so may I ask what guidance has been issued to escorting vessels about the use of force in defence of that principle?

Mr Hunt: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will understand that we do not discuss rules of engagement publicly, for very obvious reasons, but we are always doing everything we can to make sure that those vessels are able to do what it takes to keep vessels safe.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. I find the lack of resources slightly intriguing, bearing in mind what was going on in the Gulf. From what he has said, it sounds as though we are almost trying to appease Iran or fearing a reaction by sending too many resources there. If that is the case, perhaps another deterrent would be to put troops on those ships. I do not know where we are with that, so perhaps he could inform the House about that move as well.

Mr Hunt: May I reassure my hon. Friend that this is absolutely not about appeasing Iran? It is about trying to see whether there is a diplomatic avenue to prevent the seizure of British ships and giving the space for that diplomatic avenue to work, while recognising that if that fails—I am afraid that it has failed, because a British ship has been seized—we will have to take a much more robust military approach. That is the approach that we have taken, but we wanted to ensure that diplomatic window. We have considered the idea that my hon. Friend mentioned to the House, but we have rejected it because we think it would make those ships a target and create the risk of Royal Marines being taken hostage, which would create an even greater crisis.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement today and all the hard work that he has done and I hope will continue to do. The Veterans Minister, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), stated on TV yesterday that the

Royal Navy needs to be built up, reinforced and strengthened in the Gulf and, indeed, across the world. Until that happens, will the Secretary of State work alongside other countries in the Gulf—for example, Saudi Arabia and perhaps the United Arab Emirates—and others to provide policing and the protection of all ships in the strait of Hormuz?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely. We want our allies in the Gulf to get involved in support of freedom of navigation, as we do other countries outside Europe, such as Australia, that have expressed an interest in being supportive.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): The Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Foreign Secretary, who I thank, are well known for their effective use of soft power—of course, we head the index of soft power—but does he agree that that does not mean that we do not need increased defence spending? As a major maritime nation, we have duties in the world that require a larger Navy.

Mr Hunt: I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend and thank him for his question. Just to add to my earlier comments, at the point of Brexit, that will be a moment when a lot of people around the world will be looking to us to see what type of country we want to be in the world. We are one of the very few countries that has always championed democratic values and the security needed to underpin them, and the Royal Navy has an absolutely critical role in doing that.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): There are justifiable concerns that if Iran resumes its nuclear programme, there will be an arms race in the middle east, with other countries, especially Saudi Arabia, scrambling to build their own nuclear weapons. Can the Secretary of State tell us what the Government will do to address that risk?

Mr Hunt: Yes: continue to support the Iran nuclear deal, despite the pressure that it is evidently under; do everything we can to persuade Iran not enrich its uranium towards 20%, which is the tipping point from which it could develop nuclear weapons relatively quickly; and work with as many other countries as we can to try to get them to support us in those endeavours.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What discussions is the Foreign Secretary having with our allies in the Gulf, who have been warning about Iranian activities for years now, and with Qatar, which maintains rather closer relationships with Tehran, but relies on the strait of Hormuz being open to ship its cargoes of liquefied natural gas, including to the UK?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point about Qatar, because LNG is absolutely critical to the global economy. That is one of the main reasons, alongside oil, why we have to maintain freedom of navigation. We have good discussions with Qatar and all our allies in the Gulf, and we are expecting strong support from them.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary mentioned Iran's malign interventions in the region. While the House may be rightly concerned about

1. [Official Report, 24 July 2019, Vol. 663, c. 16MC.]

the strait of Hormuz, terrifying videos were released last week from Yemen of young boys between eight and 18 at the 300 jihadi training camps run by the Iranian-backed Houthis chanting, “Death to America! Death to Israel! Curse upon the Jews! Victory to Islam!” We should add that to last week’s \$430,000 donation to Hezbollah, the drone attacks, also last week, with Iranian technology, and the 30 academics in opposition who have been summarily sentenced to death in Yemen by the Iranian-backed Houthis. Does the Foreign Secretary accept that the tanker crisis is just part of the problem in the Gulf region involving Iran? We have to take a broader brush to this issue and not just focus on the tanker crisis because it affects us directly.

Mr Hunt: Yes, and the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He speaks very powerfully of one country where we see the malign impact of Iranian sponsorship, and we doing everything we can in Yemen. We have, against expectations, managed to get a peace process going in Yemen, and one of our main hopes is that that will decouple the Houthis from their Iranian paymasters, so that they can take part in a Government of national unity and contribute more constructively to peace in Yemen than the way that he talked about, because what he said is very worrying.

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his earlier answers to my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald), with which I completely agree. I know that he is nervous of straying out of lane, but does he agree that the Royal Navy is not just about power projection but has an important diplomatic role as well? Therefore, it is not just our defence policy but our foreign policy that is greatly enhanced by a larger surface fleet.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Hunt: Yes, and I wish I had made more of my strong agreement with what my hon. Friend has just said in the last few months. As we have been talking a lot about the Gulf and he has mentioned the Navy, let me talk about a couple of other areas where I think we could do with a stronger Royal Navy presence. One of them is the Arctic and the other is the Indo-Pacific region. I think in both regions it would send a very strong signal about British national self-confidence if we had the naval capacity that we would all want.

Mr Speaker: Oh, very good! The Foreign Secretary is not that bothered about straying out of lane; he is going from one region to the other. This is all very encouraging.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. I note that he said that while HMS Duncan has been despatched to the Gulf, it is there to take over from HMS Montrose—so we are still going to finish up with one destroyer covering 19,000 nautical miles and having to escort on average

three vessels a day. Are we so bereft of naval power that we cannot send an additional ship to the area and have to rely on other European nations who have not divvied up so far, or has this decision been made so that we do not annoy the Iranians?

Mr Hunt: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his eagle eye in spotting that detail, but I want to reassure him that when HMS Duncan arrives HMS Montrose will not be going out of service immediately. There will be a period, particularly the extremely dangerous period in the next few weeks, when they will be operating together. Secondly, we will get HMS Montrose back into service as quickly as we can. Thirdly, HMS Montrose is based in Bahrain, so it will stay in the region for its refitting and refuelling. It will not be far away.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I commend the Foreign Secretary for his tone during his statement, but does he agree that this act of piracy represents a pattern of behaviour from the Iranians, both directly and through its proxies, in an overall strategy to achieve regional hegemony in the middle east? What we urgently need is a strategy that restores balance, so the Iranians cannot take advantage of our strategic weaknesses.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. People who have been studying the region for longer than I have would say that there is no issue with Iran being a regional power and a great regional power; the issue is whether it is a great regional military power. It is Iran’s military presence in so many other parts of the region that is so destabilising and is the root cause of many problems. He is absolutely right to focus on that.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Iran and Iran alone is responsible for the illegal seizure of the Stena Impero, and the Foreign Secretary has made that crystal clear. Will he also be clear that if notice of passage had been given as requested, HMS Montrose would have been better able to protect that vessel?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When the Stena Impero was taken, HMS Montrose was actually only 20 minutes away and trying very hard to get there on time. I hope one of the consequences of the terrible incident that has happened is that ship owners will give us the notice we ask for when they transit their ships.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I very much welcome the Foreign Secretary’s statement and the actions the Government are taking to try to address this crisis. Does he agree that the priority now should be the safe return of the crew and the British-registered vessel?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely. What we want is secure freedom of navigation for the thousands of ships that pass through the region every year. If the ship is returned and the crew released, and if we are confident that we are returning to a stable situation, we will then of course review the military measures we have announced today to see whether they are still necessary.

Telecoms Supply Chain Review

6.3 pm

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement.

New telecoms technologies and next generation networks such as 5G and full fibre can change our lives for the better. They can give us the freedom to live and work more freely, they can help rural communities to develop thriving digital economies and they can help the socially isolated to maintain relationships. They can transform manufacturing, and make possible connected and autonomous vehicles, smart cities and agriculture. But we can begin this revolution with confidence only if our critical infrastructure remains safe and secure.

We know that there are those who have the intention and the capability to carry out espionage, sabotage and destructive cyber-attacks against our communications sector. The move to 5G brings a new dimension to those risks, given the increased dependence that our national infrastructure is likely to have on those networks over time. That is why, soon after taking up this office, I commissioned a review into the UK telecoms supply chain, involving Government, industry, international partners and the National Cyber Security Centre. It was designed to assess the security and resilience of the UK's telecoms networks, and to determine what should be done to improve them. Today, I have published its conclusions.

The review identified three key areas of concern. First, existing arrangements may have achieved good commercial outcomes, but they have not incentivised cyber-security risk management. Secondly, policy and regulation in enforcing telecoms cyber-security needs to be significantly strengthened to address those concerns. Finally, the lack of diversity across the telecoms supply chain creates the possibility of national dependence on single suppliers, which poses a range of risks to the security and resilience of UK telecoms networks.

The review concluded that the current level of protections put in place by industry is unlikely to be adequate to address the identified security risks and deliver the desired security outcomes. Therefore, to improve cyber-security risk management, policy and enforcement, the review recommends the establishment of a new security framework for the UK telecoms sector. This will be a much stronger, security-based regime than at present. The foundation for the framework will be a new set of telecoms security requirements for telecoms operators, overseen by Ofcom and Government.

The new requirements will be underpinned by a robust legislative framework. We will pursue legislation at the earliest opportunity to provide Ofcom with stronger powers to allow for the effective enforcement of the telecoms security requirements and to establish stronger national security backstop powers for Government. Until the new legislation is put in place, Government and Ofcom will work with all telecoms operators to secure adherence to the new requirements on a voluntary basis. Operators will be required to subject vendors to rigorous oversight through procurement and contract management. This will involve operators requiring all their vendors to adhere to the new telecoms security requirements. They will also be required to work closely

with vendors, supported by Government, to ensure effective assurance testing for equipment, systems and software, and to support ongoing verification arrangements.

In addition, we must have a competitive, sustainable and diverse supply chain if we are to drive innovation and reduce the risk of dependency on individual suppliers. The Government will therefore pursue a targeted diversification strategy, supporting the growth of new players in the parts of the network that pose security and resilience risks. We will promote policies that support new entrants and the growth of smaller firms. This includes research and development support, promoting interoperability and demand stimulation—for example, through the Government's 5G trials and testbeds programme. We will also seek to attract trusted and established firms to the UK market. A vibrant and diverse telecoms market is not just good news for our consumers; it is good news for our national security, too.

The review also concludes that there should be additional controls on the presence in the supply chain of certain types of vendor that pose significantly greater security and resilience risks to UK telecoms. The House will be particularly concerned, of course, with the position of the Chinese technology firm Huawei. The Government are not yet in a position to decide what involvement Huawei should have in the provision of the UK's 5G network, and I want to explain why that is.

On 16 May, the US Government added Huawei Technologies Ltd and 68 affiliates to its entity list on national security grounds. US companies now have to apply for a licence to export, re-export or transfer a specified range of goods, software and technology to Huawei and named affiliates, with a presumption of denial. On 20 May, the US Government issued a 90-day temporary general licence that authorises transactions in relation to specified areas. These measures could have a potential impact on the future availability and reliability of Huawei's products, together with other market impacts, and so are relevant considerations in determining Huawei's involvement in the network. Since the US Government's announcement, we have sought clarity on its extent and implications, but the position is not yet entirely clear. Until it is, we have concluded that it would be wrong to make specific decisions in relation to Huawei, but we will do so as soon as possible.

But I also believe that it would be unnecessary and unwise to delay the introduction of the remainder of the telecoms supply chain review's conclusions. The telecoms security requirements that the review proposes must apply to all companies that want to supply equipment and services in our telecoms supply chain, wherever they come from. The review I commissioned was not designed to deal only with one specific company and its conclusions have a much wider application; the need for them is urgent. The first 5G consumer services are launching this year, and the equally vital diversification of the supply chain will take time. We should get on with it.

I recognise that colleagues may wish to pursue further the technical detail of the proposals that the telecoms supply chain review makes, not least with officials at the National Cyber Security Centre, who will be available to answer questions in Room O in Portcullis House from 10 am to 11 am tomorrow. But I hope the whole House will agree that the future of our digital economy depends on trust in its safety and security, and that if we

are to encourage the future scale-up of new technologies that will transform our lives for the better, we need to have the right measures in place to make our telecoms supply chain both safe and secure. That is what the approach proposed in this review will deliver, and I commend it and this statement to the House.

6.11 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Good afternoon, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement and notice of today's announcement. In January this year, the Secretary of State said that the telecoms supply chain review was "not a Huawei specific exercise".

I am afraid that the report published today may be stretching that phrase to its limits. The Government's handling of the question of Huawei's involvement in the future of the UK's 5G network has been defined by one thing: confusion. Rather than this review being published as expected—in March, including a decision on Huawei's role in our future telecoms networks—we have had a flurry of delays, leaks and rumours.

Today's further delay on a decision on Huawei means that this confusion will continue, leaving the telecoms industry without the clarity and the public without the confidence they need. A ban on Huawei products could significantly delay the roll-out of the 5G technology that will underpin our tomorrow's economy. The innovative and green technologies that will form the basis of our future rely on the development and deployment of trusted 5G technology. Our digital infrastructure is already falling behind. The UK lags embarrassingly behind in international comparisons of full fibre roll-out. We are second last in the list of OECD countries, with just 4% of the UK having access to full fibre networks. What Britain needed from this review was not a muddle; we needed a new model for a genuinely world-class digital infrastructure, which we lack at the moment. So this decision must be taken as quickly and transparently as possible, because, whether the Government need to ban Huawei for security reasons or not, the Government have a roll-out target to meet: 5G for the majority of the country by 2027.

We need clarity, one way or another, and the Government should have a plan B for meeting this target if necessary. This review has provided neither. That goes directly against the advice of the Intelligence and Security Committee, which said last week that

"the extent of the delay is now causing serious damage to our international relationships: a decision must be made as a matter of urgency."

Does the Secretary of State agree?

There are some measures in this review on diversifying the market that are welcome, but this is not an overnight solution, and surely these objectives are best achieved through working with our European partners. Hitherto, the Secretary of State has sought to keep our digital regulation regime in lockstep with Europe. Can he tell us whether the EU is following suit now that the Americans have taken action? If it has not, is he not now concerned that UK digital policy is significantly diverging from that of our closest trading partners?

The situation is indeed complex, as the Secretary of State says. The United States' recent blacklisting of Huawei has added long-term viability concerns to the existing security considerations. But I am concerned

that the future of the UK's digital infrastructure is being held hostage by transatlantic geopolitics. The question here should be: what is in the UK's public interest? It should not be: where does this fit into US foreign policy? The British public deserve a trustworthy and modern 5G network that is fit for the future; I fear that, under the new Prime Minister and his Administration, they will get neither.

With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I will finish on one more point. This could be the last statement that the Secretary of State makes in his current role and, if it is, I would like to put on the record how much my team have enjoyed working with his. I have one phrase for him, from a very great man, who once sang these words:

"For what is a man, what has he got
If not himself, then he has naught
To say the things he truly feels
And not the words of one who kneels
The record shows"—

he—

"took the blows
And did it"

Huawei.

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman was doing so well until the end; I suppose I should be grateful he did not quote,

"Start spreading the news, I'm leaving today".

First, on the hon. Gentleman's last remarks, let me say that the feeling is entirely mutual: I have enjoyed working with him and his colleagues. Our constituents expect not just the cut and thrust of debate across this Dispatch Box, which we have also enjoyed, but that we work together where it is appropriate to do so, and I am grateful to him and his colleagues for the spirit in which they have done exactly that.

Let me say a number of things about the hon. Gentleman's comments on the statement. First, he is right to say that this announcement is about further delay in relation to decisions on Huawei, and I have explained why that delay is necessary. He is entirely right to say that the industry requires clarity and we should seek to give it that. At the moment, we are not capable of offering that clarity, and any decision that we were to take now might end up being different in the future when that greater clarity arrives. It is not a failing of the UK Government that is at work here, but an attempt to understand the actions of the US Administration and the implications of them.

The hon. Gentleman has said that he is concerned to ensure that this should be a decision about the interests of the UK and not the priorities of the US Administration, and I understand that. I can give him the assurance that decisions we take will be decisions in the best interests of the United Kingdom, but he knows that this is a hugely interconnected sector and it simply is not possible to make sensible judgments about telecommunications without recognising those interconnections. What the US Administration do has a significant impact on Huawei, and we have a situation in which Huawei equipment has American components and intellectual property within it. If that equipment is to find its way into the UK telecoms network, of course the actions and decisions of the US Administration are important—hence the necessary delay here.

[Jeremy Wright]

The hon. Gentleman is also right to say that this is important technology and it can have a huge impact on our economy; he heard what I said about that a little earlier in the statement. He is wrong to say that the fibre roll-out has reached 4% of the country. It has now reached 8%—it was 4% when I arrived in this job and it has now doubled. He is of course also right to say that that leaves us with a considerable distance still to travel. It is important that we do that in a number of ways, with the most important perhaps being to commit fully to a full fibre roll-out: that was a strategic decision that the Government made—again, in the past 12 months.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman makes reference to the discrepancy that there may be in the approach that different EU countries may take. Of course, it would also be right to highlight the approach that other Five Eyes colleague countries may take. A huge variety of approaches is being taken; there is no uniform approach in the EU, with each country taking a slightly different one. The same is true of the Five Eyes nations. We of course want to engage with all our international colleagues, particularly those with whom we discuss these matters on a regular basis, and make sure that we have their input. However, I go back to my earlier comment: in the end, this will be a judgment that we take in the best interests of the United Kingdom.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I welcome the publication of the Government's telecoms supply chain review report today. I am very pleased to see that the report reflects many of the points that the Intelligence and Security Committee raised in its statement on 5G suppliers on Friday. I specifically welcome the explicit national security direction power for the Secretary of State to compel telecoms operators in relation to high-risk vendors, because that issue was first raised by the ISC back in 2013.

With that praise in mind, may I pick up a couple of points? The timetable for providing Ofcom with increased responsibility for the new telecoms security requirements will clearly be of great importance. I ask the Secretary of State: will that be accompanied by additional resources for suitably skilled staff? If Ofcom is to do this job, it will need staff—probably brought in from elsewhere—who have skills that Ofcom does not currently possess. Can he give any greater clarity on the consultation timetable? I appreciate that the legislation is more difficult, but it would be helpful for the House to have an idea of the timeframe for the consultation process.

Finally, turning to Huawei, in the light of the United States' position and the lack of clarity on entity classification, I entirely understand why the Secretary of State finds it difficult to make a decision at the moment. Clearly, if Huawei is deemed to be such an entity, the reality is that none of those inventing the technology will be able to have any dealings with that company, with long-term consequences for Huawei's ability to deliver for anybody. That having been said, will the Secretary of State assure the House that this will not be used as an excuse for can kicking? I think that once the 90 days are up, as he may agree, there will be clarity, and the decision must then be made.

Jeremy Wright: My right hon. and learned Friend is right to highlight the ISC's statement, which has been an important contribution to the debate. As he knows, there is a significant overlap between what it says and the review's conclusions. On Ofcom's powers and the resources that must flow with those, I agree that it will be necessary to make sure that Ofcom has the resources to discharge its new duties properly. We will seek to give proper attention to that in the consultation process that is to follow.

On the issue of the timescale for the consultation, my right hon. and learned Friend will understand that we are keen to proceed as quickly as possible. One of the reasons why I am addressing the House this afternoon is that had I not done so this week—the House will know that I made a commitment that it would know first when we were in a position to disclose the results of this review—I would be doing it in September at the earliest, and we would be beginning this process some six weeks later than we now can. I hope he recognises that that is an indication of the Government's intention to proceed as quickly as we can, notwithstanding what he described an inevitable delay in relation to Huawei specifically.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is now three months since the national security leak that confirmed that the Government were split over allowing any Huawei involvement in the 5G network, yet it is clear that the Government are still prevaricating, while the US and Australia have been quite vocal about their concerns about the UK Government's approach. The reality is that this statement is just a lot of words to confirm further delay. Why are the decisions now being left in the gift of the new Prime Minister? Is this just another case of putting the Tory party before the country?

When we will learn the proper definitions of core and non-core network? What happens if there is a legal challenge to the definitions? Would an outright ban not simply be more robust and effective? Further, if the Government continue to progress down the route of identifying core and non-core network, what controls and oversights will there be to ensure that there is no technological solution that allows Huawei to retrieve any data from the core network, if it is allowed to be involved in future?

What assessment has been made of the existing contracts that Huawei has, including its involvement in EE's existing 5G roll-out to seven cities across the UK? Does not the existence of those contracts show how far behind the curve the UK Government are in taking action? It is a bit too late to be using the word "urgency". How long will it be before the proposed telecoms security requirements are in statute, given the failures that have been identified? When will guidance be published for the voluntary code that the Secretary of State referred to? What will the Government do to create the desired diversification policy that was outlined in the statement?

Another Chinese company with security risks is ZTE. Have the Government made any risk assessments about the fact that ZTE has been picked to construct a 5G network in Jersey? What is the current status of ZTE's partnership with BT, and has that been reviewed? Have there been wider Cabinet discussions on Chinese involvement in Hinkley Point C and the reliance on Chinese development to get the station operational?

What security risks does that pose? Does this not show that the Government need much more of a bigger-picture approach, rather than the silo approach that is happening at present?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman has asked a number of questions; let me try to deal with as many of them as I can.

On the hon. Gentleman's last point about Chinese involvement in the wider economy, he will recognise that there is a balance to be struck between welcoming inward investment into our economy, which we do, and wanting to be confident that our security requirements are met. In relation to ZTE, he may know that the Government's judgment, based on advice from the National Cyber Security Centre, is that ZTE should not have engagement particularly in the 5G communications network, which is the subject of this review and this statement.

On the hon. Gentleman's earlier points, he describes what I am announcing as prevarication. I hope that I have been straightforward in accepting that there is a delay, and I have explained the reasons for it in relation to Huawei. I do not believe that it would be sensible, responsible or helpful to anyone, including the telecoms industry, were I to give a partial decision today when I am not in a position to give a complete decision. It follows from that that when the decision comes to be made, there will be a new Prime Minister in office—that is now a little less than 48 hours away—so it is inevitable that that will be the case.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned a legal challenge. As you would expect me to say, Mr Speaker, from a former life I am always aware of the possibility of legal challenge. In my experience, it is always a possibility, but the way that we can best insulate against it is to reach sensible decisions based on defensible criteria. Again, the best way to do that is to make sure that we have all the information that we need before we make a decision of this kind. That is precisely what the Government propose to do.

It is, of course, a possibility—and remains so—that the Government may decide that an outright ban on Huawei equipment in the 5G network is the appropriate course of action. All I say today is that we are not yet in a position to make a comprehensive decision about that. As soon as we are, we will, but the hon. Gentleman has my assurance—as I indicated to the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson)—that the decision that we take will be, first and foremost, in the interests of the United Kingdom, and that security interests and our national security equities will be the most important consideration in that.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) suggests that the actions that we are taking are behind the curve internationally. That is not so. If we produce telecoms security requirements in the way that we propose, they will be world-leading measures, and we should be proud of that. We will legislate for them as soon as we are able to do so.

The hon. Gentleman asked for more detail about what diversification of the supply chain might involve. Let me give him some possible examples. We are talking about measures such as improved access to spectrum

and the promotion of new infrastructure models. He will be aware of the £200 million 5G test beds and trials programme, which we believe will support new investment, and we can and should pursue greater interoperability for equipment from different suppliers, including by requiring this in technical standards. Of course, the Government can use their buying power to promote a diverse supplier base. We should do all those things in addition to seeking to invite existing, established suppliers to come into the UK market, where they are not already present.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does this mean a delay in the roll-out of 5G to constituents in Wokingham and elsewhere? If so, how long a delay are we talking about?

Jeremy Wright: The commercial decisions that mobile network operators are making now about what equipment to buy are part of a continuing process. All those mobile network operators will need to consider carefully the position I have outlined today and make the appropriate commercial judgments, but we are seeking to move as quickly as we reasonably can to give them the clarity they need to continue making those investments.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm that the assessment of the National Cyber Security Centre is that the risk posed by Huawei equipment to the security of the 5G network is manageable and that that assessment is based on long experience and the unique experience of working with Huawei over 10 years, looking carefully at every Huawei product that comes on to the UK market? What is his estimate of the impact on the speed of 5G roll-out, which was rightly highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) as a critical question, of excluding Huawei equipment from that network?

Jeremy Wright: The right hon. Gentleman is right to talk about managed risk. He will recognise that we have been managing the risk presented by Huawei's specific circumstances within the 4G network for some considerable time. He is also right, of course, that we have to consider the potential delay to the roll-out caused by any measures we decide are necessary. I repeat that the most important criterion is that we act in our national security interest. If that causes delay, it may well still be the appropriate course of action, but we will need to decide that when we are in possession of all the facts. He has my assurance that when we do that we will make the most balanced judgment we can. As I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), all commercial operators will need to take account not just of what we have said today but of what they already know about the position in the United States and elsewhere.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Secretary of State accept that the phrase "manageable risk" is almost a contradiction in terms, because if it were fully manageable, it would not be a risk? Is he not absolutely right not to be taking a decision with such profound security implications for our future in the dying few hours of an outgoing prime ministerial administration? Finally, does he accept that unlike other suppliers, which, it is true, may have contaminated supply chains themselves, Huawei is unique in being subject to article 14 of China's

[Dr Julian Lewis]

national intelligence law, passed in June 2017, which empowers the intelligence agencies of the Chinese state to

“request the relevant organs, organisations and civilians to provide necessary support, assistance and cooperation”

to those intelligence services? We would be mad to enter into a direct security relationship with the agencies of a totalitarian communist state.

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s comments. Of course, he is right that we should take no risks that are not manageable. Once we are in the possession of all the information we should have, we will have to judge whether we are capable of managing the appropriate risk effectively. If we are not, it is a risk that we should not take. On that I entirely agree, but that decision has not yet been taken.

My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the Chinese law—it is what makes Huawei different from many other suppliers in the network—but I repeat the point I made a moment ago: a process for managing that risk has been in place for some considerable time. So far as delay is concerned, I repeat that in my judgment the right way to proceed is to delay only until we are in possession of the facts and information necessary to make the right judgment. That is the process we will undertake.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Intelligence and Security Committee issued a statement on Friday saying that the UK network had to be built in such a way as to withstand attack from any quarter. The Secretary of State knows that only Nokia, Ericsson and Huawei can provide the 5G required for the UK’s use. While his noble aspiration is to pursue targeted diversification, is that realistic given the three potential suppliers? Should we not have a resilient service that can meet any potential threat within any of those three suppliers, rather than the desperation of simple diversity?

Jeremy Wright: The right hon. Gentleman is right, but they are not mutually exclusive. We can and should do both. Diversification will not happen overnight, which is one reason why I want to proceed as swiftly as possible with that track. It will take time for us to develop diversification in the market, but none the less we should seek to do so in the longer term. In the shorter term, he is also right—he knows this from his ISC work—that part of the reason why we want a larger number of suppliers in the system is not simply that it is commercially and economically beneficial, but that there is a security benefit too. Having several different suppliers’ equipment in the system helps to prevent overdependence on any one supplier’s equipment. That is an obvious security imperative. We should do that. It is part of the calculation we make about the security imperative in this decision.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Given the fundamental issue of security, which for many of us here must override all the other interests, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on this statement on a new security framework, particularly since it will be a much stronger security-based regime than that which exists at present.

Jeremy Wright: I am very grateful for my right hon. Friend’s support. As he knows, my clear intent in commissioning the review was to focus first and foremost on security. No other consideration comes ahead of security. Fundamentally, we must make a decision on the basis of what is in our security interests, but he is also right that if we were to focus solely on one company or country, we would miss the broader important point that our telecoms supply chain must be resilient and secure, regardless of where equipment comes from, because risk may transfer from place to place and our population is entitled to expect that the approach we take puts security at its heart, wherever the equipment comes from.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): It is essential that the national security implications of using Huawei equipment be fully taken into account, but what consideration, if any, is given to the use of Huawei equipment in the repression of Uyghurs? Do the UK Government take that and the use of similar equipment by other manufacturers from China into account?

Jeremy Wright: I know that the right hon. Gentleman regularly raises this issue with colleagues from the Foreign Office. As he knows, we are concerned about it across Government. It is important that the UK Government, in their communications with the Chinese Government, stress the importance of human rights and their protections for minorities as well as for majority populations in China, and we will continue to do that. The judgments we make in this review will not diminish the UK Government’s enthusiasm for making that case.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Given that Huawei is to all intents part of the Chinese state, given that China has extensive history of intellectual property theft, data theft, cyber-attacks and the development of a surveillance state in parts of its own country, given that it is building up a dominant position in advanced comms that will eventually put Nokia, Samsung and others out of business, given the increased warnings of the Cell, and given our Five Eyes colleagues’ positions, does the Secretary of State agree that having any tech from one-party authoritarian states in our critical national infrastructure raises difficult and potentially insurmountable obstacles when it comes to data protection and protecting our human rights, the rule of law, our value system in the 21st century and security?

Jeremy Wright: I certainly think that my hon. Friend’s description justifies his reference to difficult issues. As for whether they are insurmountable, if he will forgive me I will not answer that question, because it would predetermine the outcome of the review that still has to happen specifically in relation to Huawei. However, all the points that he has made are proper for consideration as we make that decision.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): May I take the question asked by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) a little further? A million Uyghurs are languishing in concentration camps in Xinjiang, and the people of that province are under constant surveillance with the connivance of Huawei in the regime. All of us—especially those of us who are members of the Select Committee on Defence—are

aware of the security risks of the project, but the Minister and the Government have yet to answer a more fundamental question. Why should they reward a company that has been complicit in creating an authoritarian, dystopian Xinjiang with such a large Government contract?

Jeremy Wright: As I said to the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, the UK Government are not uninterested in this subject; far from it. The hon. Gentleman will understand, however, that the parameters of the review that we are undertaking here relate to what measures it is sensible to take to protect our security interests within the UK telecoms network. Elsewhere in the Government, we continue to take a strong interest in the welfare of minorities in China and elsewhere, and to make strong representations thereon.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I welcome the statement, and, in particular, what my right hon. and learned Friend said about the new national security framework for telecoms. Does he agree, however, that that framework needs to reflect the rapidly changing technological landscape in which we are operating, and needs to be properly resourced in order to be effective and serve its purpose?

Jeremy Wright: Yes, I do agree with my hon. Friend. I think that both those points are important. We need to build the framework in a way that enables it to adapt as the technology develops, and we will seek to do that. My hon. Friend will have heard me say that we intend to consult on the specifics of the telecoms security requirements. The matter will then come to the House, because we will need to legislate for the powers that will be necessary for both the Government and Ofcom to enforce those requirements.

Universal Credit: Managed Migration

6.41 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): At the core of my Department is the desire to deliver a considered and considerate welfare system that incentivises work. Universal credit has been rolled out nationally, and there are now more than 2 million claimants. We continue to listen to claimants, stakeholders and Members of Parliament in order to improve the system. In short, we examine what works, and act accordingly. That is why one of my first acts as Secretary of State was to announce legislation for a small pilot to move existing welfare claimants on to universal credit. Managed migration involves moving claimants who are still on legacy benefits, and whose circumstances have not changed, across to universal credit. The pilot will give colleagues and claimants confidence in the Department's approach to the transition before we return to the House to report on progress and seek permission to extend managed migration.

Today I am laying regulations to commence the pilot, for no more than 10,000 claimants, which will start this month as promised. We will begin with one site—in Harrogate, as previously announced—to ensure that people's transition is carefully supported. There is a possibility that the pilot will be extended to further sites as it progresses. We will be able to learn from putting processes into practice, and to adapt our approach accordingly.

The Department will continue to work closely with expert stakeholders to ensure that the pilot supports the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach claimants. Claimants who are moved to universal credit will be eligible for transitional financial protection to safeguard their legacy entitlement. They will also have access to additional financial support before they receive their first universal credit payment, including the two-week run-on of housing benefit and the discretionary hardship payment, as well as advances.

Let me reiterate that the Department does not intend to stop the benefits of anyone who participates in the pilot. Instead, we will be testing how we can encourage and support those who move over to universal credit, without halting their benefits. This listen-and-adapt, evidence-based approach is the right way in which to deliver universal credit.

We have also revised our approach to claimants who are entitled to the severe disability premium. The regulations that I am laying today will enable us to begin to provide support for claimants who were entitled to the premium and have already moved to universal credit. From 24 July 2019, those claimants will be considered for backdated payments covering the time that has elapsed since their move. They will also gain access to ongoing transitional payments that reflect the severe disability premium to which they were previously entitled. We have reviewed the rates of those payments to enable the most vulnerable to receive increased support. Claimants will now receive payments of up to £405 per month alongside their universal credit awards, increased from the previous proposed maximum of £360. We estimate that by 2024-25, approximately 45,000 of the most vulnerable claimants will benefit from this package of support, worth an estimated £600 million over the next six years. My Department will begin the process on Wednesday, ensuring that claimants are paid at the earliest opportunity.

[Amber Rudd]

Following the High Court judgment on the severe disability premium, the regulations will also—in 2021—bring an end to the barrier that currently prevents its recipients from moving to universal credit as a result of a change of circumstances. Until 2021, anyone who currently receives the premium and whose circumstances change will continue to be held on legacy benefits, as they are now. After 2021, the barrier will be removed. SDP claimants will move on to universal credit through natural migration, gaining access to the new payments that are available to those who have already moved over.

The Department will continue to follow this approach in the weeks and months to come, identifying areas for improvement and seeking new ways to give better support to claimants. In the months ahead, we will complete an evaluation of the effectiveness of universal credit sanctions in helping people into work in order to report to the Select Committee in the autumn. We will be evaluating the results of our pilots which explored the possibility of offering claimants more frequent benefit payments on demand. We will be launching a new service enabling private sector landlords to receive housing benefit rent payments directly from the Department, and continuing a proof of concept in south London to test a “written warning” sanctions model, according to which a sanction would not be applied on the first failure to attend an appointment.

I am determined—and I know the Department that I lead is determined—to ensure that universal credit is always a force for good.

6.47 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement.

Universal credit was meant to simplify the social security system. In fact, it is deeply flawed, and has caused real hardship to so many people across our country.

In March, the Secretary of State shockingly announced her intention to pilot managed migration even before she had secured approval from Parliament. Now she has left it to the eleventh hour to bring these regulations to Parliament. Managed migration is deeply controversial. The Government’s original intention to send nearly 3 million people a letter saying that their benefit would stop on a particular day, and that they would have to apply for universal credit, shifted the responsibility for securing essential support for millions of people from the state to the claimant. In so doing, the Government would have risked catastrophic consequences for many of the most vulnerable in our society. Understandably, the plans were met with outrage from many sections of society: how could a Government visit such a plan on the people?

It really is important for these important regulations to be debated on the Floor of the House. The Government committed themselves to doing that on 8 January, when the Minister for Employment, the hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), said:

“We will...ensure that the start date for the July 2019 test phase...is voted on.”—[*Official Report*, 8 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 175.]

Can the Secretary of State therefore guarantee today that the regulations will be debated in full, and voted on in the House? To do any less would be an absolute disgrace.

It is hardly surprising that universal credit is so controversial, given that it has caused so much misery. During the geographical roll-out, we have seen a sharp increase in the number of people going to food banks where it has been introduced. That is a source of shame for the Government. It cannot be right that in one of the richest countries in the world, children are going hungry and their parents are having to seek help from food charities.

In its report “The next stage of Universal Credit”, the Trussell Trust says:

“Benefit transitions, most likely due to people moving onto Universal Credit, are increasingly accounting for more referrals” to food banks.

In a report published last month entitled “Universal Credit: What needs to change to reduce child poverty and make it fit for families?”, the Child Poverty Action Group says:

“The DWP stated in response to the Social Security Advisory Committee...report on managed migration that”

the Government

“would ‘explore options’ to remove the need for a new claim, so it is disappointing that the regulations put forward for the managed migration pilot do not allow for this by giving the department the power to create claims.”

So can the Secretary of State enlighten us: do the regulations she lays today address that?

The Child Poverty Action Group goes on to say:

“We understand that officials are reluctant to go down this route but we believe that their concerns are surmountable and do not justify the risks involved in the current proposed approach: that people will be given a deadline for claiming universal credit and will have their legacy benefits terminated if they do not manage to do so on time.”

The Secretary of State says in her statement that the Government do not intend to stop the benefits of anyone participating in the pilot; intentions are all very well, but the regulations we have seen thus far show Government giving themselves the power to do just that, so will she give a guarantee today that no one will have their benefits stopped?

The Secretary of State says that the Government have revised their approach to claimants entitled to severe disability premium, and that the regulations she is laying today will enable the Government to begin to provide support for claimants who are entitled to severe disability premium and have already moved to universal credit. These are severely disabled people who have had vital financial support cut by this Government, so why is it only now, after months on end, that the Government are going to begin to provide support? What thought has she given to the hardship her lack of action has caused? What assessment have the Government made of the hardship that severely disabled people may have been suffering because of their loss of income? What assessment have the Government made of the impact on the children of the severely disabled who may be asked to take on additional caring responsibilities because of their family’s loss of income? And what would the Secretary of State say to the Disability Benefits Consortium, who wrote this month that

“Many disabled people have not yet felt the full extent of the cuts made to welfare benefits, as many have not yet moved on to Universal Credit. When that happens, there will be dramatic increases in the levels of poverty among people who are already at crisis point. It is a disaster waiting to happen”?

The role of any pilot is to justify the whole, yet we know the flaws in universal credit are causing real hardship; the five-week wait and the insistence on making and managing a claim online build in disadvantage to the millions who are deeply disadvantaged already through low literacy levels or lack of access to IT. I note the Secretary of State's comments on support during the pilot, but that will do nothing to help subsequent claimants. There is also the requirement of monthly assessment periods for the self-employed while their tax assessment period is annual, creating additional expense and administrative costs for that group. The abject failure of the Government to address the issue of irregular payments remains unaddressed too, and the stories of people having all their benefits stopped because they are paid twice in one month through no fault of their own are going unheard. The two-child limit is penalising families despite the horrific child poverty statistics, with over 4 million children going without sufficient food, shoes that fit and the security of knowing their families have enough. It is vital that these regulations are debated on the Floor of the House so that all of these issues can be addressed.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady is determined to demonise what is a very sensible approach to trying to ensure that universal credit delivers what it is intended to deliver. She has given us a catalogue, as always, of the things that she disapproves of, but let me just highlight the things that are relevant, perhaps, to what we are discussing today.

On the one hand the hon. Lady criticises me for, as she puts it, coming out at the last minute and on the other hand she asks why this has not been done before. The hon. Lady cannot have it both ways: we are determined to get on with this, which is why I am here today, and which is why I am sticking to what I said we would do, which is to make sure that we come back to the House before the managed migration pilot begins.

Getting support for this measure is incredibly important, which is why we are proceeding by negative resolution. We are doing that—to answer one of the hon. Lady's questions—because that was the advice we received from the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments. The benefit of that, which I hope the hon. Lady will agree with, is that we can begin making the payments as soon as possible. She asked why we have not got on with making the payments; on the basis of what we are doing today, we will be able to get on and start that on Wednesday.

The hon. Lady asks particularly about how we will ensure that nobody actually loses their benefits. As I said in my statement, I am absolutely committed to ensuring that the managed migration is handled in such a way that nobody loses their benefits. The numbers that we are dealing with in Harrogate and the support that we are getting from the jobcentre and, happily, from the Member of Parliament my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), who is present, will make a huge difference to ensuring that every single person has that positive experience.

I know that somebody—hopefully me—will have the opportunity to come back next year and report on the outcome from this managed migration pilot. Getting it right and engaging with stakeholders and making a success of it is going to be absolutely crucial to continuing to build on the success of universal credit.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): CS Lewis said:

“We are what we believe we are,”

and I believe that a civilised society is coloured, crafted, characterised by how it treats its most vulnerable citizens. To that end, I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment that claimants moving through the process will receive transitional protection and protect their income as they move. However, Mr Speaker, you will know as a constituency MP, as we all do, that the assessment of need is of critical importance and that too often in analysing need the system has been cruel in its crudity and callous in the criteria being applied to that assessment, from being rigid and insensitive to dynamic conditions, particularly degenerative ones. So will the Secretary of State during this process agree to review the means by which needs are assessed, to ensure they are fit for purpose?

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question and his continued interest in ensuring that the poorest in our society and in his constituency are well looked after. The purpose of the managed migration pilot is to make sure that we get it right; constantly engaging with stakeholders will be part of that, and of course we will take any learnings from that.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement, although it is staggering that the Department for Work and Pensions is pushing out regulations days before recess. Although it is correct that the back-payments are being issued—Members across the House, including on the SNP Benches, have been calling for that—hearing about them 48 hours before the change takes place is, frankly, disrespectful to the House and outrageous.

I have a number of questions. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the Government are formally accepting the decision of the High Court? That leads to the next question, which is about the £405 a month. Will the Secretary of State publish how that figure has been calculated, to give us all an opportunity to see that the Government are complying with the High Court decision? The Secretary of State has confirmed that these regulations will be laid by the negative resolution procedure; however, her predecessor had committed to allowing the House to debate the new regulations. Why is the House not being given the opportunity to debate them? Finally, can she confirm that the Social Security Advisory Committee has been consulted on these new regulations?

Amber Rudd: To address the final question first, yes the SSAC has been consulted. On how the amounts have been arrived at, that is broadly in line with what the tribunal has recommended, but I will take the opportunity, if I may, to write to the hon. Gentleman so that he can see the set-up for himself. He asked about the previous Secretary of State and her commitments: the commitment that we are delivering on today is to respond to the requirement to lay the legislation and for me, the Secretary of State, to come to the House and set out why we are doing it. The advice that we have received is to use the negative resolution procedure, because things have been changed since the former Secretary of State laid the original legislation, but I

[*Amber Rudd*]

acknowledge that to move in future from the pilot to the full managed migration is likely to need much fuller debate.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): In contrast to the utterly absurd and over-the-top response of the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), may I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend on the humane and enlightened way in which she is proceeding with these very important changes? Will she confirm that it includes the approach she is taking to the receipt of benefits by people who have terminal illnesses? Will the consultation she promised me and others only very recently—I am very grateful to her, as are my constituents, for her help—be concluded as soon as is conceivably possible, so that these kinds of inhumane mistakes are not made again?

Amber Rudd: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his comments and for his time in discussing with me a constituency issue that contributed to my responding in an accelerated way to the plans I was already formulating for looking again at how we support people with terminal illness diagnosis. Yes, I will continue to proceed with that at pace, because I am very conscious that the people who have that sort of diagnosis need as much support as possible, as soon as possible.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, but may I please ask why it has taken over a year to get to this position, and only then with the help of a High Court action that her Department lost? How many other actions does she expect to have in this area of her administration, and will she now publish the criteria by which she will judge whether the pilot is a success, before the pilot is completed?

Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his questions. I am aware that there is, quite rightly, a lot of interest in how we will assess the pilot, and I have been looking at that myself. Ultimately, the pilot will be a success if we get as many people as we expect across from the legacy benefits to universal credit as effectively and efficiently as possible. I want to ensure that we give them the right support, and that they have an effective transfer. The process we have at the moment will be based on “Who knows who?”—“Who knows me?” will be the theme—so we are engaging with organisations and individuals to ensure that they get the right support. I have already requested my Department to look at the suggestions that the right hon. Gentleman kindly made last week about finding out which organisation might support which individual and who those individuals receiving notice to move might trust and prefer to engage with. I will be taking that forward as well.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her statement. Has she been able to look at the five-week delay for new universal credit claimants to see whether it can be reduced? A lot of us on both sides of the House feel that it could be reduced to much less than five weeks.

Amber Rudd: I know that my hon. Friend has raised this on several occasions, and he will be aware that the Department has already made changes that will affect

the run-on of housing benefit and additional legacy benefits by the end of next year. I will always look at finding ways to get those essential funds to the people who really need them as early as possible.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I have just attended the oral session for an inquiry looking at the health impacts of the Welfare Reform Act 2012, in which it was revealed that 240 children a year die as a direct consequence of being pushed into poverty and, ultimately, because of the cuts in social security support. Will the Secretary of State look into the harms to and deaths of not just children but disabled people as a consequence of the policies she is introducing?

Amber Rudd: I will always look at evidence, and if the hon. Lady wants to show me any of the evidence she has been on the receiving end of, I would be happy to look at it. I point out to her, as I have done previously, that overall we will be spending more money under the universal credit system by 2023-24 than would have been spent under the previous system, so I am not entirely in agreement with the conclusions she draws, but we will always take an open mind to the facts that she presents.

Mr Speaker: I am very glad that the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) has reconsidered his decision to beetle—or, in his case, perhaps to stroll—out of the Chamber, because I note that even as we deliberate on the most serious and solemn matters, not only has he been seated like a dignified Buddha but he has demonstrated that his penchant for alliteration never ceases.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Individuals with a disability premium on their employment and support allowance are still eligible for housing benefit because universal credit does not cater for cases that are out of the ordinary—for example, those receiving recovery services. Since migration, however, many people are not receiving payments because local authorities are not providing the correct information or recognising the special circumstances of such claims. Can the Minister advise what, if any, training is planned for local authority staff, to ensure that they give accurate advice and subsequently provide appropriate and proper payments?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this. I am determined to ensure that local authorities are correctly informed so that they can support not only the managed migration pilot but managed migration overall. That is one of the things we hope to learn from the Harrogate pilots. We will be giving them a small amount of extra support to ensure that we can learn properly from the jobcentre. Perhaps that will be one of the things we will look out for.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Secretary of State should be aware that one of the canaries in the universal credit system is in the transition from live service to full service. One of my constituents was forced to make an entirely new claim, but errors were made. My constituent's income was interrupted, split payments were cancelled and they had to explain the situation again and again to jobcentre staff. Reassessment on health grounds was proposed, despite my constituent

having been granted a 24-month bye on the live service before the move to full service. How can my constituents have confidence in the Government when the system is so riddled with errors as it evidently is? Is it not the case that, for many people, the canary in the universal credit system is dead?

Amber Rudd: It is disappointing to hear from the hon. Lady that her constituent has had such a difficult time. I hope that we will be able to erase any errors that have taken place in the past and ensure that we have a seamless process in future. I would just tactfully point out to her that the system this replaces had many more problems. I would like this system to be perfect, and it is my aim to get it as close to that as possible. The previous system, which had six different benefits in three different places, was incredibly hard work and really cruel to some constituents, and I hope that most people appreciate that this system will be more effective and efficient.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement that the Department will not stop the benefits of anyone participating in the pilot, but has she calculated what resources the local jobcentre will need to ensure that this happens for the very vulnerable people involved? In Harrogate, 56% of the people involved were already on universal credit in February, and I understand that fewer than 2,000 are due to migrate using the process. That is far less than the rest of the country, where there is an average 27% roll-out. What resources are being put in place in Harrogate and in other places where the pilot will be rolled out, to ensure that the people are supported? Will the people who receive transitional protection for their severe disability premium see that protection eroded as universal credit progresses? Will the Secretary of State confirm whether they will receive any uplifts from universal credit if they are also on transitional protection? Will those people also suffer deductions from their universal credit, which will in many cases make people worse off? Will she bring forward the run-ons of legacy benefits from June next year as planned, to ensure that people who are transitioning to universal credit under the pilot can benefit from those run-ons?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady asks a lot of detailed questions, and I will do my best to answer them, but if I have not done so, I hope she will write to me so that I can complete my response. A discretionary hardship fund will be in place for the individuals who are being managed-migrated from legacy benefits to universal credit in Harrogate, which will be the equivalent of the legacy benefits being paid in addition that were going to be received next year, in June 2020, for people who are being moved from one benefit to the other. So the answer to her question is yes, but the type of payment will be under the umbrella of a discretionary hardship payment instead. She asked about the support that the jobcentre will get. We are working with it, and a dedicated team is working closely with my Department to ensure that there is true learning from the experience of moving people in this way. She asked specifically about Harrogate and why we were doing it there. The answer is that it already has a relatively high level of people on universal credit, but a significant number will still need to be transferred. I did say in my statement that it might not

be the only location, and we are taking permission to do up to 10,000, so it may mean that, to complete that learning process, we do it elsewhere as well. We are keeping an open mind on that, because it is essential that this really covers the serious matters of getting it right, some of which have been raised in the House today.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State use this pilot to review thoroughly the impact of the catastrophic five-week delay policy in universal credit? It is forcing people to use food banks, as the Trussell Trust reports; forcing people into debt to her Department, because they have to take out what she calls an advance but is, in fact, a loan; and, as we have discovered over the past two or three weeks, opening up a bonanza for crooks and fraudsters who dupe people into taking out unwanted advances and claiming universal credit. Will she do a thorough assessment of the impact of the five-week delay as part of the pilot's evaluation?

Amber Rudd: The right hon. Gentleman is no doubt aware that, in addition to the advances, the housing benefit run-on and the legacy benefits run-on will come in next year, and they are effectively part of the transitional arrangements being offered to the pool of people who are having their migration managed. The right hon. Gentleman has raised this matter before. I have bent over backwards to ensure that we get funds to people as soon as possible, and former Secretaries of State have done the same, but I know that some people still have concerns about what more we can do to ensure that people on the lowest incomes are supported at the moment of difficulty when they move from one benefit to another. I will always take an open mind to looking what we can learn from that going forward.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I recently received confirmation that one of my constituents, with the support of my constituency office team, had been awarded more than £2,000 in benefits that had been wrongly withheld. While that was welcome—he certainly welcomed it—why should somebody have to go to the MP, and why should an MP's staff spend days and days on an individual case just to get somebody the money that is theirs by right?

For 18 months, my constituents have been used as guinea pigs for a failed and failing system. During that time, rent arrears have increased, food bank usage has increased and personal debt has increased. One of the Secretary of State's ministerial colleagues actually suggested that the reason for the increase in food bank use might be that everybody knows where the food bank is, but nobody can find the jobcentre. Glenrothes jobcentre is right next to the bus station, and someone cannot get a bus in or out of Glenrothes without going past the jobcentre. Does the Secretary of State believe her colleague that the increase in food bank use in my constituency is because a high-profile jobcentre has become invisible, or would it be more honest to say that food bank use is increasing because my constituents and many others are victims of a welfare system that is no longer fit for purpose?

Amber Rudd: I simply do not recognise the hon. Gentleman's characterisation either of my ministerial colleagues or of the intention of universal credit. The

[Amber Rudd]

hon. Gentleman describes his jobcentre in some detail, and I expect he knows some of the work coaches who do such a remarkably good job engaging with individuals and trying to help them into work. I ask him to remember that before he describes the system as not fit for purpose. The former system was not fit for purpose, with six different benefits from three different places and no personal interaction. Universal credit is much more positive for his constituents and for mine.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State look at the system that encourages claimants to take out a new enterprise allowance to go into business, but one year down the line, when they might still be building up that business, the system assumes that they are earning a minimum amount? A Kilmarnock couple came to my surgery on Friday to say that they have been left with absolutely no income because their UC assessment has assumed a level of wages that they are not making. They are in hardship, and it is quite possible that businesses will fail as a consequence of this system. Does she agree that that is another example of why universal credit is not fit for purpose?

Amber Rudd: I want to take this opportunity to say that the new enterprise allowance has been a great success in supporting businesses, and I am pleased with how it has been picked up by MPs and constituents. As for the one-year policy that the hon. Gentleman referred to, we must ensure that we get the right balance between supporting enterprise and making sure that taxpayers are supporting businesses that have a strong future. If he feels so strongly about it, he will no doubt want to make a submission to the spending review at the end of the year, but I think that the balance is right at the moment. We have to think about whose money it is, how it spent and where work will be available to people.

Point of Order

7.14 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you been given any indication that any statutory instrument may be brought forward to amend the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971? I believe that a small statutory instrument is all that is required to allow supervised drug consumption rooms in Glasgow to go ahead. They are very much needed given the deaths of 1,187 people in Scotland last year. Has any indication been given to you that such an instrument might come forward before recess?

Mr Speaker: I am not aware of any such intention. My understanding is that there will be statutory instruments tomorrow but not, to the best of my knowledge and recollection, on this subject. The Clerk at the Table is swivelling around, which is sometimes testament to his desire to vouchsafe valued advice, but he has re-swivelled, which suggests that, in fact, he has no such desire at this stage. In all solemnity, I must say to the hon. Lady that I am not aware of any such plan. It is obvious that she thinks that there should be a plan and, knowing the persistence and indefatigability that she has demonstrated in her four years in the House, I feel sure she that will be registering her point with force and alacrity to Ministers for as long as is necessary to secure the outcome that she seeks.

Serjeant at Arms

7.16 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride): I beg to move,

That this House expresses its appreciation to Kamal El-Hajji BEM for his distinguished service since February 2016 as the first BAME Serjeant at Arms, and for his prior 12-year career in public service at the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Constitutional Affairs, all of which service was notable for its geniality and quiet determination, and extends to him its best wishes for his retirement.

It is a pleasure to move this motion, for I am sure that I speak for the whole House in thanking Kamal El-Hajji for his work as Serjeant at Arms—a position that he has served in this Chamber with distinction and through some of its more important moments in recent history. I thank him on behalf of the whole House for his three-and-a-half years' service.

A lot of water has passed under Westminster bridge since Kamal took up his role in February 2015. He was already a distinguished figure before coming to this place, having received the British Empire Medal following his time at the Ministry of Justice. Kamal's experience there, and in previous roles including at the Department for Constitutional Affairs, led to his selection by a panel led by you, Mr Speaker. The appointment of a Serjeant at Arms with a black, Asian or minority ethnic background had been a long time coming—604 years, to be precise—and we should rightly celebrate that important milestone. Kamal has demonstrated, through his service, that Parliament is for everyone in the UK.

Certainly, Kamal's enthusiasm for Parliament has made him an able champion of this place, as has his facility for languages. He has welcomed distinguished visitors in an official capacity from a variety of nations, including several heads of state—the Princess Royal, the King of Spain, the King of the Netherlands, and the President of Slovenia—and countless visitors from right across the United Kingdom. Kamal has commanded respect among those who visit and work in Parliament. That may partly be because he bears a sword in the Chamber, or because, as I understand it, he has a close familiarity with the martial arts, but perhaps it is more likely to be because of his magnificently distinctive uniform and proud bearing and demeanour.

Among the cut and thrust of everyday politics, it is all too easy to forget that we are privileged to serve in an institution with such a distinguished history. Our outgoing Serjeant at Arms has certainly embodied that. It is an office with deep roots, and life for past Serjeants has never been straightforward, whether enforcing the Speaker's order within the early modern Chamber or, in the 20th century, working to continue our parliamentary democracy amid the rubble of the blitz. During the raid of May 1941, almost 1,500 people were killed and the Palace itself was hit more than a dozen times. Members then looked to the Serjeant at Arms to take a leading role in organising temporary arrangements so that the House could continue to sit and that our democracy could prevail.

It is in that tradition and with that spirit that Kamal himself showed great resolve when the House again found itself under attack in 2017. With reports of an attacker within the estate, and in the face of evident danger, Members present at the time reported that

Kamal conducted himself with the dignity and authority we would expect, remaining in the Chamber throughout and supporting Members while the building was locked down.

We are grateful to all those who undertake to protect us as we go about our role of representing constituents. As we conduct our proceedings, we are reminded that there are times when our democracy has to be protected by actions as well as by words. That is why I hope that, as he steps down to spend more time with his wife and two boys, Kamal will look back with great pride on the years in which he played his part in fulfilling those responsibilities. During his time with us, he, too, has contributed to the history of this place by serving us right here in this Chamber, the very cradle of our democracy.

We wish Kamal well. He leaves with our thanks and deepest gratitude.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House, both for what he said and for the way in which he said it.

7.20 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for moving the motion paying tribute to Kamal El-Hajji.

The office of Serjeant at Arms dates back to 1415 or, as Morecambe and Wise would have it, quarter past 2. Kamal El-Hajji has diligently served as Serjeant at Arms of the House of Commons for three and a half years and, as the Leader of the House mentioned, Kamal is the first person from a BAME background to hold one of the most prestigious posts in UK public life. During his tenure there has not only been an EU referendum but a general election.

Kamal has had a distinguished 12-year career in public service. He became the head of front of house and VIP relations at the Ministry of Justice in 2010 and, since 2001, he held a number of administrative and security roles at the Department of Constitutional Affairs, as it then was, and later the Ministry of Justice. In 2015 he was awarded the British Empire Medal for services to the Ministry of Justice.

In Parliament, Kamal performed his ceremonial duties with dignity and grace from day one, including with his retirement last Friday. As the Leader of the House pointed out, Kamal is a martial arts expert, which meant you were very safe as you walked along in the procession, Mr Speaker.

Kamal's excellent interpersonal skills, commitment to customer service and genial manner will be missed, especially by Members who have had the pleasure of working closely with him. We have been fortunate to have a colleague who was so kind, genuine and helpful.

Kamal has a young family, and his main reason for retiring was to spend more time with them and his wife. He has been an outstanding public servant, and Her Majesty's Opposition wish him and his family good health and happiness for the future.

7.22 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I join the tributes to the Serjeant at Arms. He is distinguished, he is dedicated, he is perceptive and he is respected by Commons staff and by MPs. He has led, served and experienced all that this House has to offer.

[*Sir Peter Bottomley*]

When his appointment was announced, Kamal said that with the help of Allah—I recommend that people look up the expression because, as Islam is one of the Abrahamic religions, Allah is the same God that the Jews and the Christians acknowledge—he would do what he could. He has been described as a gentle giant, but I forget whether it was by you, Mr Speaker, or by Rose Hudson-Wilkin, the Speaker’s Chaplain.

Kamal is a natural peacemaker, and he is passionate about Parliament. He has helped everybody with whom he has come in contact. People respect him for the loyalty he has shown during his years here, and he has always looked for the best in others. It is right that we describe him as someone who cares about what we do and who cared about what he did. We wish him well.

We know that, at times, it is not the Serjeant at Arms but the Clerk to the Serjeant at Arms, such as Judy Scott Thomson, whose voice is still heard when the lift gets stuck, telling us not to panic and not to do what we should not do. But it is the Serjeant at Arms who provides the leadership and Kamal, whom I referred to as “Sir,” has done really well in his time here. I wish him well, and I hope, with the help of Allah, he will enjoy his time in retirement.

7.24 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for moving this convivial and important motion. I want to express the appreciation of Scottish National party Members for the service that Kamal El-Hajji has given to this House over the past few years.

Kamal has discharged his responsibilities in a courteous, good-natured and thoroughly professional way, to the extent that he has become a good friend to many of us on both sides of the House. Scottish National party Members have got to know him a bit better due to proximity, as he is surrounded by the SNP throng and we have more opportunity to share stories and anecdotes with him.

Such is the attention this place receives that several people actually think Kamal is an SNP Member, although they wonder why an SNP Member has buckles, breeches and a sword. “He doesn’t say very much, but he seems to be better dressed than the rest of you,” is what we tend to hear.

Of course, Kamal is the first BAME Serjeant at Arms and the first Muslim to hold his post, of which he should be immensely proud. A serene zen calm comes from him as he perches on his chair. He is a centre of serenity in these frenetic surroundings. He is the most relaxed wielder of the sword this place will ever have. Yes, he is a gentle giant, but he is a dignified one. He is a gentle giant who happens to be well-rehearsed in the good use of all sorts of martial arts.

It is now time for Kamal to pass on the sword. It was never pulled in anger, even though I tried on several occasions to encourage him to go into the Lobby to move on recalcitrant Members who would not go through in time; he never obliged me. Perhaps I will have better luck with the next Serjeant at Arms.

It has been a pleasure to work with Kamal, and it has been a pleasure to know him. I know he is retiring to spend more time with his young family, but he is a very

young retiree at 60 years old. I think he will be tempted back into public service in some capacity, and there are several roles that would be ideal for somebody with his skills and abilities. We hope to see him back in some form in the future but, for now, I wish Kamal all the best and good luck. Enjoy your retirement.

7.27 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Speaking from the Liberal Democrat Bench, I feel compelled to echo the words of everyone who has spoken.

On a personal note, I should say that I am the first MP of British-Palestinian descent, and I have discovered that I am the first of Arab descent of any kind. What perhaps you do not know, Mr Speaker, is that Arabic has been spoken in this Chamber on many occasions because, every time I came in, Kamal and I would look at each other and speak a little in Arabic.

Every time there was something happening in the House, Kamal’s unflinching kindness would shine through. He would often call me over and say, “This has happened. I want you to take care of yourself.” I am sure I am not the only Member for whom he did that. Kindness emanates from him, and he has a steely centre. We knew that if anything happened, he would be there for us.

I would simply like to say, in the words of our shared heritage: shukran, merci, thank you.

7.28 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On behalf of the Democratic Unionist party, I wish to convey my thanks to Kamal El-Hajji for his time in this House. There is no doubt that, on many occasions, we all felt a bit more secure because he was here. As the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) said, he would summon us with a look, and he would look after us and tell us what to do.

As you know, Mr Speaker, I am usually here in the late hours for the Adjournment debate and, on many occasions, the Serjeant at Arms was here as well, so we got to know each other. It is one of the wee things you probably notice, Mr Speaker, but he would step back and click his heels together whenever he took down the Mace, which reminds me of when I clicked my heels during my Army days—he seems to have that bearing, too.

Mr Speaker, you can take much credit for your leadership, and we all greatly welcomed the House having its first BAME Serjeant at Arms. We were very pleased to see him here.

This House does tradition, history and culture exceptionally well. Every nation around the whole world wishes that it had the tradition and history that we have, and Kamal brought that across each and every time that he represented us in the House. This great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland does it so well, and does it well together. Kamal is always perceptive, helpful and personable and I put on the record our thanks to him. Kamal epitomises all that is best in the House, and I wish him, his wife and his children every happiness for the future and thank him very much for what he does and for what he has done for us in the past.

Whoever the new Serjeant at Arms is, we look forward to them doing equally well; we have a great tradition here. Kamal's work in the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Constitutional Affairs, and the fact that he received the British Empire Medal, reflect on his qualities, which the House has had the pleasure and happiness to enjoy together—not only in friendship, but in respect of the security position that he held for us.

7.30 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Having heard other Members' tributes to the Serjeant at Arms, I wish to speak only of my personal experience of dealing with Kamal.

In all my dealings with the Serjeant at Arms, he always strived to help me. For example, when some MPs were—horror of horrors—smoking on the non-smoking part of the Terrace, he took my concerns seriously, and I received letters of apology from those MPs. To the best of my knowledge, they have not yet repeated their offence. He also managed to clear the Members' Families' Room of Members of the other place, so that the children of my SNP colleagues could stay there safely when they were down during the Scottish summer holidays, which, as everyone should now know, are totally different from the holidays here in England.

Because of where the Serjeant at Arms sits—my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) referred to that—I have been able to have wee chats with Kamal, who always asked me how I was during very difficult personal circumstances. He always talked fondly of his young family; he has told me that he is leaving so that he will be there for them, and I am sure they will enjoy seeing much more of him. I wish him a long and happy retirement.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question, I want to take the opportunity to say how grateful I am to all colleagues for what they have said on this occasion by way of tribute to Kamal El-Hajji. It rather reinforces a very deep and long-held sense that I have had about our Serjeant, which is that, among all sorts of other positive characteristics, he has excellent interpersonal skills and is extremely popular with right hon. and hon. Members. They trusted him, knew they could rely on him and recognised his interest in and commitment to them. I can honestly say to the House that throughout his three-and-a-half-year tenure in post as Serjeant, no Member ever came to me to speak ill of him. Members esteemed him. He discharged an outward facing role, to

boot, interacting with and offering a service to those who visited the estate. In that regard, too, I heard no complaints and much praise.

Kamal loved the House of Commons. He was enormously proud of having the opportunity to serve here, and he came to us on strong recommendation from his previous work. Indeed, I remember him enjoying very positive references—one written and the other oral, if memory serves me correctly—from distinguished Government Ministers who had interacted with him and who wanted very warmly to commend him to me. When he came to us for interview, one of the factors that weighed heavily in his favour was the moving and powerful examples he gave of how, in earlier roles, he had sought to defuse tensions and to act as an effective conciliator between different parties, each of which felt very strongly that it had right on its side. He was very much a peacemaker. I can, however, confirm that I was always mightily impressed, as others were, by his bearing and evident physical robustness. It is indeed the case that he carried himself extremely impressively. Although I am not the naturally nervous type, to be accompanied by Kamal as Serjeant, whether he had a sword with him or not, was always greatly reassuring to me as Speaker.

Colleagues have conducted themselves on this occasion as I would very much have hoped they would: from different parties, independently of each other, with fond and appreciative memories of somebody who cared about this place, contributed to it and is appreciated by it. Over the past three and a half years, I have of course come to know Kamal and his wife well, and to appreciate the importance of his family. He will spend time with his wife and family, including with young children at an important time in their lives. As he goes off to discharge his personal responsibilities, he does so with the respect, affection and good will of Members and many others right across the House of Commons.

Question put and agreed to.

BILL PRESENTED

SCHOOL FOOD BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Layla Moran presented a Bill to amend the Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014 to further restrict the serving of foods high in fat, salt or sugar in schools and to require all school meals to be free of added sugar by 2022; to require all publicly-funded schools to adhere to those standards; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 426).

Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) Bill

*Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee, considered.
Third Reading*

Mr Speaker: I call the hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), the Minister in a hurry, to move the Third Reading of the Bill. He may be a Minister in a hurry in more ways than one—I know not—but, as always, he is a happy and positive-looking Minister.

7.37 pm

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

I always try to be pithy, Mr Speaker, as you instruct us to be, but this is an important matter, so we shall proceed without too much haste.

Ratepayers have told us that the current system, with revaluations of business rates every five years, has not been responsive enough to changes in the rental market. They have asked us for more frequent revaluations so that the system is fairer and more closely reflects the rents that they actually pay. This small but significant Bill delivers what business has asked for: it moves business rates revaluations in England on to a three-yearly cycle, and brings forward the next revaluation to 2021 so that ratepayers benefit from the change as soon as possible.

I am grateful for the contributions of all Members, both on Second Reading and in Committee, and thank them for their support for the Bill. In the public evidence sessions, we heard from various business groups that expressed their support. I thank them, including the Confederation of British Industry, the British Retail Consortium and the Association of Convenience Stores. I give particular thanks to the Local Government Association and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy for not only their comments in the evidence sessions but their work with my officials to ensure that we can implement the Bill in a manner that meets with their approval.

Lastly, I give thanks to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), who has been, as ever with these relatively short and uncontroversial Bills, thoughtful and constructive in his approach. I am of course grateful to the Clerks of the House and, indeed, to my team, who have managed to get this important piece of legislation through its various stages with efficiency and effectiveness.

This is a small but important Bill that continues our support for business in this country, and I commend it to the House.

7.39 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The Bill came around very quickly from Second Reading to Committee and then to Third Reading, which just shows that, when Parliament decides to do something, it can do it. Perhaps that is because we are light on business and there is time to debate and discuss these issues. I know that this is a geek interest—I take pride in being a geek and in liking data, numbers and finance, and this is an important matter. We cannot achieve the Government's ambitions if we do not have a solid

financial foundation. Business rates, although boring for many people, are actually a very important part of that. I also wish to echo the thanks to the Clerks for supporting the passage of the Bill. As always, they acted with absolute professionalism and ensured its smooth passage.

The purpose of the Bill has already been outlined, which is that it creates a three-year cycle and brings forward the revaluation period by one year. None the less, issues were raised on Second Reading and in Committee. I am slightly fearful that the Minister will be whisked away to another Department very shortly, and that we will lose his consistency and thoughtfulness. It matters not only that we pass the legislation in this place, but that we manage the transitional arrangements and the impact that naturally follows. We need to see what transitional arrangements will be in place. We need to ensure not only that the valuation office has capacity and is encouraged to deal with the backlog of 60,000 appeals going back to 2010, but that it has the people to deal with a new revaluation in the appeals process that will come. We need to make sure that the transitional arrangements are there, so that those who are adversely affected are able to manage that transition.

As part of the wider review, we need to ensure that we are clocking the geographical shift in valuations that takes place with every revaluation, because if we are going to move to 50%, 75% or 100% retention, that will naturally have an impact on the financial stability of local authorities that are part of those schemes. If, after every revaluation, we see a transition to the values of London and the south-east, that will not help build the northern powerhouse, which is a shared ambition for everyone who cares about the whole of the UK benefiting from the country moving forward.

We also need a more fundamental review of local government finance. I really feel sorry for local government Ministers. It is not right that the Treasury often has a closed mind to their funding issues, that they are told to deal with the envelope of money that they have, and that they are always last in the queue, behind the NHS, the police service and other more pressing Departments. The truth is that, if we do not get this right, older people will not get the care they need, younger people will be put at risk, and, critically for democracy, people will question why they are paying more and more council tax for less and less of the neighbourhood services that everybody enjoys universally. We on the Labour Benches will be holding our own review.

I thank the Minister for his approach during the course of this Bill, and I look forward to scrutinising it through the transitional arrangements as we approach the revaluation.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business Without Debate

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL (3 SEPTEMBER)

Ordered,

That, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 10(2)(b), the sitting in Westminster Hall on Tuesday 3 September shall begin at 11.30am, shall be suspended from 1.30pm to 4.30pm and may then continue for up to a further three hours.—
(*Michelle Donelan.*)

PETITIONS

The exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union

7.43 pm

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The petition states:

The Petition of residents of Corby and East Northamptonshire, and the surrounding areas,

Declares that the Brexit that the petitioners voted for should be adhered to and delivered in full by Her Majesty's Government; notes that the free-movement of people from the EU should be ended; further that immigration should be better controlled and the system fair; further that the United Kingdom should stop sending billions of pounds each year to Brussels; further that the United Kingdom should be allowed to make its own laws in our own country; and further that those laws should be judged by our own judges. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Prime Minister to take into account the concerns of petitioners and deliver the Brexit which the British people voted for.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002495]

Shelton Road Planning Application

7.44 pm

Tom Pursglove: The petition states:

The Petition of residents of Corby and the surrounding areas,

Declares that the planning application requesting for a combined heat and power waste facility to be built at Shelton Road, Corby, should be rejected; notes that the proposed site is adjacent to a new housing estate at Priors Hall Park, as well as local schools, and specifically the Corby Business Academy; further that the energy from waste industry is an explosive one with numerous accounts of plants exploding causing death and injury to workers and others nearby; further that the incineration of waste for energy recovery is a waste of valuable resources and is harmful to the environment and local communities and does not form part of a circular economy. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to press upon Corby Borough Council and Northamptonshire County Council to reject the planning application, and for the developers to find an alternative, more suitable site, thus reducing any negative impacts on young students and local residents.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002497]

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Clearly, we are soon moving on to the Adjournment debate. As there seems to be more time than is often the case, would it be in order for Members such as me who are concerned about chalk streams to make a contribution to the debate, or do I need the permission of the Member in charge or the Minister?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I can help with that: no, in both cases. As there is more than half an hour for the debate, it is open for other Members to speak—obviously as long as their speech is relevant.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con)
rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that Dame Cheryl is going to ask a very similar question.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Mine is an entirely separate point of order. It is based on rumour and press comment recently. It will not have escaped your notice, Mr Deputy Speaker, that, over the past 10 years, on many occasions in this Chamber, I have had the privilege of raising points about HS2, which is a railway project that goes through the middle of my constituency. Over the period of 10 years, I have been saying that the cost of this project will rise dramatically. The press has reported that Mr Cook, the acting chairman, has possibly written to the permanent secretary in the Department for Transport to raise the £30 billion—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I think I have the message.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: May I continue?

Mr Deputy Speaker: No, no, you cannot—I am on my feet. First, I understand that the Minister is now here, and we can carry on. There is no need to make spurious points of order. I am well aware of HS2. As you well know, as a member of the Panel of Chairs, points of order are meant to be short and succinct. I think that we can both agree that that was not. I think we have finished.

Degraded Chalk Stream Environments

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Jeremy Quin.)

7.47 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me for my Adjournment debate this evening. I am delighted that I did not try your patience with a spurious point of order, as that really would have been naughty. If I had tried your patience with a spurious point of order, it would have been on an environmental matter, and I would have just wanted to know how I could bring to the attention of this House the fact that, on Friday afternoon, the Secretary of State refused a planning application by Veolia to build a massive incinerator in my constituency. I was delighted with the refusal, and I now hope, as do all my constituents, that Veolia will give up its plans to put the incinerator in my constituency, give up trying to put one in Hertfordshire and disappear. If I had made a spurious and bogus point of order, that would have been it.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Walker: I will give way on that point, but I would like to get to the substantive part of my speech.

Sir Oliver Heald: Does my hon. Friend agree that mine was not a spurious point of order? I have seven chalk streams and I want to make a speech.

Mr Walker: Of course, and there was nothing spurious about my delight at Veolia failing to get its application through—it was just that I wanted to bring it to the attention of a wider audience.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): My point of order was not a spurious one. I wanted to inquire whether the Secretary of State for Transport had indicated that he was going to make a statement on the escalating costs of HS2, which will damage the chalk streams in my area, as my hon. Friend well knows.

Mr Walker: I thank my right hon. Friend for alerting the House to that very important point. HS2 does pose a risk to chalk stream and riverine environments. No doubt if time allows, my right hon. Friend will bring her concerns to the attention of the House.

Sir Oliver Heald: I had miscounted; I have eight chalk streams in my constituency.

Mr Walker: My right hon. and learned Friend is such an honest and decent man. He could have misled the House that there were seven chalk streams in his area, but he has corrected the record without being summoned back—in fact there are eight.

Let us now get to the serious part of this debate, because this is a very serious matter that causes a great many colleagues on both sides of the House a huge amount of concern. The Colne; the Beane; the Mimram; the Gade; the Ver; the Chess; the Misbourne; the Wye; the Rib; the Hamble; the Bulbourne; the Quin; the Hogsmill; and the Wandle. The list could go on, but these are all chalk stream rivers that are degraded or dying around my constituency in Hertfordshire and the

constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) in Buckinghamshire. This country has over 85% of the world's chalk streams, and these streams are a unique habitat.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman and I share many loves of the countryside—particularly a love of country sports, but also a love of the environment. Does he agree that there is a delicate balance to be struck to ensure that companies can continue to operate as they attempt to find alternative sources of water rather than chalk streams? What more does he feel can be done as a matter of urgency to protect these environmental treasures, because treasures is what they are?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is very perspicacious in his observations. I shall come to the matter later in my speech. He is absolutely right to raise that point and I hope that both the Minister and I will be able to address it, as I know other colleagues share his concerns.

The degradation of our chalk streams is one the two greatest environmental scandals of the late 20th century and the start of the 21st century. Of course, the other great environmental scandal is the destruction of the marine environment off the west coast of Scotland through salmon farming—an industry that has laid waste to numerous sea lochs off the west coast of Scotland and has destroyed the native fish runs in many of the rivers that feed those sea lochs.

It is important that I put the situation in context. As I said a moment ago, we have 85% of the world's chalk streams and most of them are highly degraded. I find it extraordinary, given our own poor environmental record, that colleagues in this House lecture Indonesia and Brazil so freely on their responsibility to the rain forests. Of course, those two countries have a huge responsibility to the rain forests, but if we cannot save the chalk streams that are literally in our own backyard, what are we doing lecturing other countries on their environmental responsibilities? Saving the world does not start with the rest of the world. Saving the world starts right here, right now, doing our bit locally with our chalk streams—think locally, act globally.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has just pointed out, our chalk streams are literally being abstracted to death. Parts of the streams that I named at the start of my speech do not flow. In fact, a few of them barely flow at all from their source to where they join a bigger river. That is our record and it is one that none of us should take any pride in—and it is getting worse. We have had three dry years in a row. There is this myth that we live in a wet country. Certainly, parts of our country are wet but the east and the south-east are actually dry, and they are getting drier. The aquifers are not being replenished by rainfall and they are getting more abstracted, so even less water is going into our rivers.

Let me give an example from the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham. In the last 10 years alone, there have been five dry events in the Upper Chess—the most stunning river, which I have the great privilege of visiting once a year as a guest of Paul Jennings and my right hon. Friend.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: It is always a great pleasure to welcome my hon. Friend to Chesham and Amersham, particularly at the invitation of Paul Jennings. Does he agree that Paul Jennings is one of the most outstanding advocates for chalk streams and our environment, and that he should be praised for all the efforts that he and the River Chess Association put into trying to maintain and preserve this chalk stream for our children and our children's children?

Mr Walker: I entirely agree. I know Paul Jennings well; he is one of the greatest friends any chalk stream could have. He is a conservationist of the highest order, and he deserves our full congratulations and respect for the tenacity that he has shown in ensuring that the issues that afflict so many of our chalk streams are kept somewhat in abeyance on the Chess. However, I am afraid that even he would admit that he has not always been successful in doing that.

As I was saying, in the past 10 years there have been five dry events in the Upper Chess. In the 20 years prior to that, there were three. Drier years mean more abstraction, and things are only going to get worse. Affinity Water serves the home counties north of London, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) will know. Affinity has no reservoirs. It only abstracts waters from the chalk aquifers—that is the only place it can get its water from. As we know, the aquifers it abstracts from are those that feed the rivers that are currently dying. Affinity currently serves 3.6 million people. In 20 years' time that number will be nearer to 4.5 million people. Where on earth is the water going to come from? If we go on as we are now, the water will come out of the aquifers and we will not have a single chalk stream running in Hertfordshire or Buckinghamshire. That is not an exaggeration; that is where we are at.

Affinity has tried, within the constraints that it is operating under—bearing in mind that it has no reservoir. It reduced pumping at one pumping station on the River Beane by 90%, which was actually a very brave thing to do. Yet that part of the river has not started flowing again because the long-term damage to aquifers that have been used and abused for the past 30, 40 or 50 years is so extreme that it may take decades to recover.

It is not just abstraction that kills rivers; it is also what happens after the abstraction. If companies are abstracting water from chalk streams, they either dry them out—and that does kill them—or they reduce the flow. When there is low flow in a river, it cannot get rid of pollutants; pollutants concentrate. A river that is flowing well can move pollutants on down it, dilute them and dissolve them. This does not happen when a river is being extracted to death. So what is the next consequence of extraction? We get topsoil run-off, which just sinks to the bottom of rivers and depletes them of oxygen. It sticks to the chalk at the bottom, destroying any oxygen that can get into the chalk for the small invertebrates that live in it. Then there is phosphorus from agriculture and sewage works, which causes oxygen depletion from algal blooms and eutrophication. Basically, we have environments that cannot support life, or which support limited life, because there is no oxygen. Agricultural pesticides wash in off the fields, destroying biodiversity and wiping out invertebrates and the fly life that comes

from them. Then there are the many septic tanks up and down the country that are unregulated and leaking into groundwater that finds its way into rivers. The challenge is immense.

As I said, this is an environmental crisis of a monumental scale that we are failing to address. Fundamentally, we need to reduce abstraction now. Thames Water, which I have worked closely with at times, has done that on the River Chess and the River Cray, but it wants to do more—and quite frankly it needs to do more. So what is Thames Water doing? It is making efforts to reduce leakage, and those are to be welcomed and applauded. It can introduce metering, promote water efficiency, and go into schools to educate children as to the importance of water, but, at most, these efforts will reduce consumption in the area it serves from 142 litres per day to 136 litres per day. That is just not a significant decrease. It is an important amount of water, but at 3.5% it is not going to save the day. Thames Water estimates that by 2045 there will be a shortfall of 350 million litres of water a day between the amount of water available and the amount needed.

There is only one game-changing solution to this crisis, and that is to create more storage capacity, which we do by building more reservoirs. I think that the last major reservoir we built was the Queen Mother reservoir for the east and south-east of England in 1974, so we have grown the population by millions but we have not put in any additional water storage. If we want to save our chalk stream rivers, of which we have 85% of the world's resource, then we really have to build reservoirs. The spade-ready reservoir that has been on the books for 12 years but has been blocked by a well-organised group of 20 people is the Abingdon reservoir in Oxfordshire. That is a game changer. If we get the Abingdon reservoir built, that starts to create the capacity we need, but at the rate the population of London and the south-east is growing, we will need more than one Abingdon—we will need two or three Abingdons. Until we start capturing water at the times of plenty and using it during dry periods like we are experiencing now, we will remain in trouble. We will be in a position where our own environmental record falls well short of where it should be, and we will limit our ability to change the way that other countries handle their natural resources, because they can look at us and say, "What on earth are you doing? You are in no position to lecture us."

I could go on at great length, but I am not going to. In fact, I may have already gone on at great length, but this subject warrants some exploration. Finally, I would like to thank the Angling Trust, particularly Martin Salter—a former Member here—and Stuart Singleton-White, for the amazing document they have published, "Chalk Streams in Crisis". It really is an extremely good, but somewhat depressing and sad, read. It is a call to arms. If we are to be taken seriously, we have to make changes to the way in which we approach our valuable and precious ecosystems. One of the most valuable and precious is our chalk streams, and, as I said, we have a lamentable record in this area.

8.3 pm

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) on his thorough, wide-ranging and very informative speech. I, too, was exercised to come to this debate having read

[Jon Cruddas]

the report by Martin Salter that he referred to. It is a fantastic piece of work that all Members should have a look at.

The hon. Gentleman is a passionate and long-term defender of our river system. I simply want to make a couple of technical points. To clarify, by contrast to him, I am not and I cannot self-identify as a fisherman. I have stood by a few chalk streams with him occasionally, but that does not make me a fisherman. However, just like him, I am worried about how we preserve the unique biodiversity and international reputation of our threatened chalk streams. My chief concern is the degradation of our river systems due to water abstraction and what this tells us about some wider public policy concerns that we should all share in this House, irrespective of whether we are advocates of fly fishing in chalk streams.

It seems to me that the basic issue is quite simple: how can we protect our natural environment and chalk streams without making alternative sources of water available? The fundamental issue is how we can make more water available. As has been said, we have unique resources in this country. England has 160 of a total of 210 chalk streams in the world, and southern England has several of the greatest chalk streams on the planet. Yet today many of them are in an appalling state. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, no water is moving through them—there is no flow—and year on year the situation is getting worse. It is literally happening in front of our eyes: our unique river system is dying through a lack of water. I recently saw some data that suggested that only 14% of the rivers across England are now considered to reach good ecological standards. That is an environmental catastrophe, as the hon. Gentleman said.

The question is, why is it happening? Without doubt, our climate is changing, but this crisis is not about drier winters, hotter summers and drought: that does not give the whole picture. That is why this seemingly narrow conversation about chalk streams has much greater significance in terms of wider public policy issues and concerns. How do we achieve the provision of new water? The supply, distribution and quality of new homes is a central issue, as are the role of the water companies and patterns of regulation. These are all issues that—dare I say?—flow out of this debate about chalk streams. The demand for water, especially through new house building in the south east, has dramatically increased. For example, it is estimated that in my part of east London—in Barking, Dagenham and parts of Havering—there will be some 50,000 new units in the next 10 to 12 years. That is an awful lot of house building, and the question is, where will the water come from? Nationally, we seem to be moving towards a consensus of at least 300,000 extra units a year, which returns us to the question where the water will come from.

I, too, read the Thames Water briefing that was sent out at the back end of last week. It said—I think the hon. Gentleman mentioned these figures, which caught my eye—that accounting for climate change, population growth and environmental regulations, there will be a daily shortfall of some 350 million litres a day by 2045, and that will, in turn, double in the following 50 years. So this is an environmental catastrophe that is being played out day to day across the country.

A failure to provide new water means that water companies extract water from our rivers, which cannot cope and subsequently die. That appears to be the basic reality. The rivers are further undermined when excess sewage is discharged into them, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. Time and again, the water companies have been fined, but they just take the hit. The point that he did not make is on how the water companies free-ride their ecological responsibilities. For example, last week it was brought to my attention in *The Guardian* that Ofwat has reduced the fines on Southern Water from £37.7 million to just £3 million for thousands of pollution spills, wilful misreporting of data and cover-ups. How will this type of leniency and—dare I say?—criminality be changed in terms of their behaviour, which is degrading our river systems?

Objectively, it seems clear to me that we need new water infrastructure, leakage reductions, smart metering, education and desalination—those all have their place—but the reality is that we do not have enough reservoirs. I think that the hon. Gentleman said that the last one was built in 1975. He can correct me if I am wrong, but I thought it was 42 years since we built a reservoir in this country. If we join the dots, the policy does not add up. How can we satisfy growth in London and the south-east without such new infrastructure? If this is not confronted, the current crisis that our rivers face will intensify and they will never recover.

As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, Thames Water has announced plans to bring forward the Abingdon reservoir, with construction starting in 2025, but I gather that this has been beset by problems. It would be good to hear where we are with that project and any other proposed infrastructure projects, not least because the responsibility lies with several different authorities: the Environment Agency, the National Rivers Authority, the Government and the water companies. I will end on that point, but I repeat that tonight's short and apparently narrow debate has great significance, not just for those who fish in our unique chalk streams, but for everyone who is interested in how we will meet the demands of a growing population without further degrading our river systems and wider environment. That is something that should be beyond party politics, and something on which we might all agree.

8.10 pm

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) for his remarkable and important efforts in this area.

In my constituency, we have eight chalk streams: the Upper Rhee, the Rib, the Ash, the Quin, the Beane, the Mimram, the Lea—near Bayford, where I think my hon. Friend fishes—and the Ivel. There has been some progress with the Beane and the Mimram following the WWF campaign “Rivers on the Edge”, of which Martin Salter was a strong supporter and about which we had debates in this House. There has been a 90% reduction in abstraction at Whitehall pumping station near Watton-at-Stone, and the Fulling Mill pumping station at Welwyn Garden City was completely decommissioned; that represented some success.

As my hon. Friend said, however, the condition of the northern part of the rivers is very dry. The Upper Rhee is dry, and there is a lot of concern about the Rib

in the Standon area and north of Standon. The situation is similar with the Ash and the Quin. The Beane at Walkern, north of Watton-at-Stone, is short of water. There is a campaign in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) about the Mimram. The Lea is low, and the Ivel springs in Baldock are so dry that people regularly write to me to express their concern.

It is worth thinking about what the unique chalk stream environment is like. My constituency has small hills, between which are the chalk streams, and they create a unique environment with unique flora and fauna. Nestling in the environment provided by these ecosystems are flowers such as saxifrage, as well as small English crustaceans and the water vole. Tewinbury nature reserve is a very good place to measure the activity of flies and little creatures, and that is a remarkable thing to do. I pay tribute to the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, which does so much to support that.

Mr Charles Walker: I am sorry to cut my right hon. and learned Friend off as he is paying tribute to the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, but I want to pay tribute to it as well. Jeremy Paxman recently wrote that we no longer have to clean our windscreens, because there are now no insects splattered on them. There are so few insects because our rivers—and, in our part of our world, our chalk streams—have been so degraded that insects can no longer live there. Without insects, we have no fish and no kingfishers; the whole ecosystem and food chain begin to collapse. My right hon. and learned Friend is entirely right to raise that concern.

Sir Oliver Heald: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. People such as Jeremy Paxman, Feargal Sharkey—he used to be a pop star but now spends his time campaigning on this issue—Charles Rangeley-Wilson, who my hon. Friend will know, and Martin Salter, on the angling side, are dedicating their lives to trying to make people realise that this environment is as precious as the Brazilian rainforest. We have a major part of a unique environment. The water that comes up—or should do—from the aquifer is so pure, and that is a wonderful thing.

As my hon. Friend said, the problem is a mixture of abstraction; climate change, which means that in the next 25 years we will have 20% less water than we do now; and growth in housing, which means that we are trying to do more with less water. Some of the predictions that house builders and developers make in planning applications—they say that they will be able to get people to use no more than 100 or 120 litres of water a day—are just not in the real world. In my constituency, the average is about 175 litres a day. The first thing that people do in a water-efficient house is to put in a power shower, spoiling the good work of the designers. My hon. Friend is right to say that those predictions do not add up.

Soil erosion is a big issue, on which I have campaigned with WWF; it recently ran a campaign about the subject. As has been said, one of the effects of not having strong rivers is that they end up with soil in them, particularly if farming techniques are not respectful of the surrounding environment. In an area such as ours with hills that have chalk and soil on top, it makes a lot of sense to go for no-till farming, so that the soil is not blown off the tops of hills and into rivers. There is a lot that can be done.

I pay tribute to the societies in my constituency—including the Friends of the Mimram, the River Beane Restoration Association and the new organisation for the River Rib—which are trying hard to highlight the plight of the rivers. Despite the campaigns, the work that has been done and the reports in this House going back some years, we have made only a little bit of progress against a background of deterioration. It is a question of one step forward and two steps back. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue and giving us a chance to highlight the importance of this environment and ecoculture. Much more needs to be done.

On the Abingdon reservoir, I came into this House in 1992, and Thames Water was lobbying us then about building the Abingdon reservoir. Here we are 27 years later, and it has still not been built; it is still a few years away. We need to get on and do this. The background is against us, and action is needed.

8.16 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald). I congratulate the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) on his speech, to which I listened increasingly intently as I sat on the Front Bench earlier. As someone who grew up in the area that he talked about, I am very familiar with much of the Hertfordshire geography and many of the wonderful landscapes that he described so passionately and fondly. It would have been very easy for me to leave the Chamber, but the threat of the loss of those habitats moved me to feel compelled to speak, and I thank him for that.

I will keep my comments brief. It is interesting that we often talk about the environmental crisis and climate emergency in various other manifestations, but we rarely talk about the threat that water shortages pose to our existence. I think we agree that climate change, as we face it, threatens us in many ways. We are experiencing a changing climate and changing weather events of a new severity. We grew up with wet Aprils, and perhaps even wet Mays, but we no longer experience them.

The climate in our country is changing, as it is across the world. We must think about how we address the challenges, whether it is by creating large reservoirs, as has been described, or by changing our housing planning policy that governs estates and new builds. We must insist on the attenuation of water on industrial and business parks and in our housing. There is so much potential to capture and re-use water with grey water harvesting systems, and all new houses must be built with them. I am proud to say that 10 years ago, I installed one, and it makes a dramatic difference to my water consumption.

These are the sorts of things we can do immediately. As has been described, we must of course build more capacity through reservoirs. I remember the Queen Mary reservoir from my youth and from driving around it, and there is such a need, as has been described. However, we can do this in addition by building capacity, on a very local basis, with our new homes. That will make a significant difference in reducing abstraction. May I again thank the hon. Member for Broxbourne? I welcome the debate, and I congratulate him on it.

8.20 pm

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western). When I was growing up politically, one of my great mentors was Sir Keith Joseph. He said that one of the greatest challenges we were going to face in the future of the world was water shortages and the resulting movement of populations around the world, and I think that is starting to come very true today. My mother was always very keen on saving water. I do not know how many hon. Members will remember doing so, but she used to put a brick in the cistern to make sure that she did not use too much water when flushing the lavatory.

Aside from that, may I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) on obtaining this debate? It would be fair to say that he and I have spent many a happy hour, with Paul Jennings, sitting beside one of the purest and clearest chalk streams, the River Chess, just outside London. It is not even at the end of the Metropolitan line; it runs alongside the Metropolitan line. It is accessible to the public, and it is one of those wonderful habitats and environments that can really bring people peace and tranquillity. People can leave this world behind as they sit there and, in the case of my hon. Friend, try to attract a trout to the end of his line.

Mr Charles Walker: The great sadness is that, to the uninitiated eye, the river looks beautiful—and it is beautiful—but as Paul Jennings would say, it is clinging on by its fingertips. Its flow is a fraction of what it should be; although it remains beautiful, its ability to support life is just draining away.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I am afraid my hon. Friend is right. I came into the House at the same time as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald), in 1992. That reservoir is not overdue, but long overdue and should have been built many years ago.

May I also pay tribute to the authors of “Chalk Streams in Crisis”? Four of the organisations that contributed are closely associated with my constituency. The Chilterns chalk streams project—a fantastic project started in 1997, prompted by the low flows in the 1990s—was expanded in 2000 to include all the rivers. It is led by the Chilterns Conservation Board, with the River Chess Association and the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire wildlife trusts. All these organisations work constantly and tirelessly to try to protect our environment.

Sir Oliver Heald: In my constituency, there are people who can remember swimming in the River Beane north of Watton-at-Stone when they were very young; now it is completely dry. Does my right hon. Friend have constituents with such recollections about the Chess?

Dame Cheryl Gillan: Yes, very much so. Both the Chess and the Misbourne, at times in the past, flowed really well and invited people in during the hot weather, such as we are going to experience this week, in safety. Safety is very important, because although there is now the amazing rough swimming movement, it is important to remember that rough swimming must be carried out in safety. People need to think about how they are

getting into the water and how they are getting out. I fear there will be plenty of people diving into the water later this week, as the temperatures soar.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for letting me join this brief debate on chalk streams. I am going to spend the first Saturday of my recess canoeing down the River Chelmer in Chelmsford. I believe all our rivers are potentially in crisis and need protection. Does she agree?

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I think the points made by colleagues across the House have been very accurate in that we are busy lecturing other people around the world about how they should save their environment, but we are not actually looking over our shoulders at our own backyard, which is deteriorating.

The point that we have 85% of the world’s chalk streams is not lost, particularly in the south-east, because about a fifth of those are in the Thames Water region. The combination we have talked about—the climate and the geology of where these chalk streams are—means that they have the most amazing characteristics. They support special wildlife habitats and species, including things such as the brown trout and the water vole. Chalk streams are really important not just for angling, but because they are fed by groundwater aquifers. That means the water is clear, pure and inviting, which is of course why the water companies always wants to take water from them.

The hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) spoke about the Thames Water briefing that was put out. He said he was struck by the predicted shortfall of 350 million litres of water a day between the amount of water available and the amount we will need by 2045. Population growth, climate change and environmental regulations will dramatically affect our demand and need for water. I echo the call made by the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington, because unless we build in safeguards and build in the reuse of water, we are going to find ourselves in a desert and in a drought like no drought we have ever seen. We take water for granted in this country; it is such a shame that we have that attitude. We will have to change it if we are going to preserve our environment, particularly our chalk streams.

Mr Charles Walker: I hear what my right hon. Friend says, and she is absolutely right. There is nothing more irritating than to hear weather forecasters on the BBC, ITV or radio programmes such as on Radio 4 going, “Good news, it’s going to be a dry week”, or “Good news, it’s going to be a dry weekend”. This country needs rainfall. We do not have it in abundance—and when we are not having it, we really do suffer.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: The point is well and emphatically made: that is absolutely right.

Matt Western: The right hon. Lady is being very generous in giving way yet again. I would just add that so much of our culture has been steeped in this green and pleasant land, as it is oft described, but it is becoming increasingly parched. There is one point I want to raise with her. Does she share with me a slight concern that, with HS2, there will be some sort of disruption to the watersheds in her constituency and potentially to those in my own in Warwickshire?

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I like the cut of the hon. Gentleman's jib, as they say. I am going to get on to HS2—I tried to get on to HS2 earlier, but I was admonished—because it is important.

I want to make a couple of points, particularly about my own constituency. In the Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty, we have nine chalk streams. The River Chess and the River Misbourne sit within my own constituency, and I am afraid the problems are identical for both. When we talk about the term “over-abstraction”, I think that is to use the phrase quite mildly. To put this crisis into context for the Chilterns specifically, the average person there uses about 173 litres of water a day, which is 32 litres above the national average. In the Chilterns, we are also facing unprecedented levels of infrastructure development.

Being at the end of the Metropolitan line, we are obviously a popular place for people to live out of London, and we now have the arc of innovation joining Oxford to Cambridge. We will face housing pressure down from the north of the county and across the middle, which will bring hundreds of thousands of houses and more pressure on our precious environment. London and Slough are also expanding, so we have more and more demand coming up from the south of the county for housing and therefore water. The Chilterns AONB is being squeezed in the middle, yet it is the lungs of London. It is the nearest easily accessible area where people can enjoy the pleasures of walking in the hills and by the chalk streams, watching the red kites soar above, yet we will lose all that unless we try to protect it.

The Chess and the Misbourne are unique in finding themselves in the unfortunate position of being in the HS2 route and therefore part of what was a £55.7 billion taxpayer crisis—what I gather is now more likely to be an £85 billion crisis, according to the chairman's internal review, if the rumours are correct. I believe the figure will be even higher. This is not just about the financial cost of HS2, but about the damage done to our chalk streams, which will cause a loss of environment and habitat that is irreplaceable.

For years my constituents have sent me pictures of the Chess and the Misbourne when the flows are low. They come back, but one day they will not. The River Chess in particular is one of the most important areas of wildlife. I have mentioned the brown trout and the water voles, but we also have stream water-crowfoot there. We get fishermen, photographers and the wildlife enthusiasts coming out. The Chess is also an important educational asset as a chalk stream, and we get universities gathering data and people coming to study there. It used to be very active, with amazing water mills, but that would not be possible today. The Chess was a productive river; we could not find that today. Those water mills are now private houses. The weather and the climate becoming drier, interspersed with some very wet periods, has done the chalk streams no good at all. The river also faces other threats, including from invasive species such as the mink and Japanese knotweed, and that is on top of the extraction for public water supply and the pollution that results from the concentration as the flows become lower.

I very much hope that this debate, which was called by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne, will stimulate a greater interest in these chalk streams and a

greater will on the part of the Government to protect them. We are pleased to see that Thames Water and Affinity Water are planning to work together on a new reservoir project near Oxford, which now features strongly in both their new water resource management plans and in Thames Water's revised business plan for 2020 to 2025. The south-east region of the UK is one of the driest and most populated corners of the country and has the highest demand for water. If we do not increase our reservoir capacity, it will become the desert of the United Kingdom.

This excellent report, which we have all had the opportunity to read, contained a number of recommendations and actions. I will not read them out, but I recommend that the Minister reads them carefully and studies what could be an important way forward in giving vital protections to this part of our environment. It is unique, and the status of these chalk streams is important not just to the environment in the United Kingdom, but to the world. Once we have lost them, we will never ever get them back. If there is a climate change crisis, there is certainly an even bigger crisis in the state of our chalk streams.

8.33 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the register.

I have the honour and privilege to represent a large part of the Berkshire downs, which feed the chalk streams of the Kennet, the Dun, the Lambourn and the Pang. These are very special riverine ecosystems. As was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), whom I congratulate on calling this debate, chalk streams are hugely important not just for the area where the river flows, but for the entire catchment. They are extraordinary features of our natural world. Areas such as the Berkshire downs, and others that hon. Members have spoken about so eloquently, are the water towers of communities such as London, where we sit tonight, and they are under threat as never before.

In a brief moment of relevance in my parliamentary career, I held responsibilities not dissimilar to those held by my hon. Friend the Minister. We had had a number of years of drought, and that year we faced the Olympics and the Queen's jubilee. The fifth largest economy in the world was literally at risk of having people in the south and south-east of England filling their water from standpipes in the street—an extraordinary moment. We were on the point of having Cobra meetings. The then Prime Minister, David Cameron, said to me in the Lobby, “Just make it rain.” That gave me powers of the divine, because you will remember, Madam Deputy Speaker, that, as the Queen and Prince Philip stood by the Thames, the heavens opened.

I do not take any responsibility for that, but the problem was not that it rained—that was very welcome—but that it rained for three years. All the work we had been doing in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on drought management, fantastic work across a whole range of different trade bodies, other organisations and agencies of Government, was subsumed by having to deal with too much water. We have terribly short memories in this place and in Government. I hope that what is happening now is starting to cause real concern, because if we have another dry winter my hon. Friend the Minister and her colleagues will be contemplating a real emergency.

[Richard Benyon]

Mention has been made this evening of the great naturalist and broadcaster, Jeremy Paxman. In his foreword to the river fly census, produced by Salmon & Trout Conservation, he mentions what my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) referred to: insect armageddon, the really quite staggering reduction of insect life in this country. My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne made the point clearly that we have to understand where those insects come from and what they depend on. Jeremy Paxman says in his foreword:

“No-one much cares about it, because creepy crawlies find it harder to make allies than do soft and cuddlies. Ludicrously, even pests like grey squirrels have more friends.”

We in this House have to be a friend to the insects. Some 80% of species on our planet are invertebrates and the foundations of food webs.

The river fly census shows some alarming facts. Species loss in any environment indicates ecosystem distress. Across 12 chalk streams in England there has been a 75% decline in caddisfly species, a 54% decline in stonefly species, a 44% decline in dragonfly and damselfly species, and a 40% decline in mayfly species. A river in my constituency, the Lambourn, a most beautiful and precious river with overlaying European designations—a site of special scientific interest, an area of outstanding natural beauty and every conceivable designation one can think of—is effectively in crisis.

My contribution tonight is really this: the management of our rivers, particularly the fragile ecosystems that are chalk streams, needs to be perfect. There is no margin for error in how we manage chalk streams. I am therefore concerned when I read that a salad washing company in the upper Itchen, Bakkavor Salad Washing, has found itself in difficulties with the Environment Agency over its own sewage works. I gather that it has now addressed them, following discharges that were reported to the Environment Agency. The EA's investigation, however, also exposed a potential pesticide threat. The EA has not been able to rule out damage caused by traces of pesticide present on the salad leaves used by Bakkavor, which were subsequently being washed into the upper Itchen. I understand that the EA is monitoring the situation, but that cannot be allowed to happen. In an ecosystem as precious as this, which is suffering from really low flows, there is no justification whatever for a company to be polluting an environment as rare as this.

Vicky Ford: I have heard stories from fishermen about salad washing. They tell me that the salad is not even grown in the UK, but has been brought to the UK for washing in our rivers and then packaging. If that is true, that is even more shocking, but maybe it is a fisherman's tale.

Richard Benyon: I have heard similar stories, and I do not know the circumstances of this. I wrote to the company before this debate asking for it to give its side of the argument, but I did not hear back. I am not necessarily criticising the company, as I approached it only at the end of last week.

My point is this: in our management of these rare systems, we need not just to be getting the sort of thing I was just discussing right, but to be looking at agriculture.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire was so correct in what he said about that. Min-till—minimum tillage—agricultural systems are vital, not least because of the worms that are allowed to prosper in the soil, which affects the permeability of that soil crust so that water goes through to the aquifer, rather than running off and taking with it a lot of the topsoil. We have a wonderful, rare and special opportunity that we can now deliver through the Agriculture Bill and the environment Bill. We are talking about changes that can make sure we are incentivising farmers and working with them right across a catchment to deliver extraordinary benefits.

Sir Oliver Heald: I wonder whether my right hon. Friend would wish to comment on the state of the River Kennet, which is a precious chalk stream close to him. Where does he think the Kennet is going—is it improving? Some attempts were made to improve its condition. Secondly, when he was preparing the water White Paper, I think he was hoping that it would be possible for water companies to move water more easily from one area to another. Has he any take on how that has been going?

Richard Benyon: One of the most enjoyable things I did in government was writing the water White Paper, and I refer my right hon. and learned Friend to page 35—I think that was the one. It showed a scene of good farming on one side of a river and bad farming on another, so that figuratively laid out before us was what we needed to see more of and what we had to stop happening. I bored my civil servants with that and I bore most of my family, with my wife referring to the River Pang as my mid-life crisis, but the River Kennet is in such trouble. A few years ago, someone spilled about an egg cup-worth of Chlorpyrifos into the system somewhere and it effectively killed several miles of life. That shows us just how extraordinarily vulnerable these ecosystems are.

We can debate great matters of state in this place, and we often do, but rivers are about people's sense of place. As has been said, we can hold our heads high internationally if we are getting it right on rivers and we cannot if we are getting it wrong. What is shaming is that, while 85% of the chalk streams in the world are in the UK, we are getting it wrong. Wonderful things are done by organisations such as Action for the River Kennet and many of the other organisations that hon. Members in all parts of the House have talked about, but I believe the recommendations at the end of the river fly census are really worth reading.

In the context of the water framework directive, which we are transposing, correctly and with more ambition than exists in that directive as it stands, we should have a special designation for chalk streams. We should also look at the impact of phosphorus spikes and recognise that after we leave the European Union the world is our oyster and we do not have to be stuck by the same rules that govern rivers in southern France and northern Spain. This is our ecosystem, and we have to get it right.

Dame Cheryl Gillan *rose*—

Richard Benyon: I will give way for a final time, then I will conclude.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. We are currently reviewing the position on national parks and the designations that we make around the country. I have asked for the Chilterns AONB to have a stronger designation in order to give it protection. Does he agree that we should see whether the chalk streams in our country could get a higher designation for protection? Does he agree that this would be a golden opportunity to lift that level of protection, particularly for this rare habitat and environment?

Richard Benyon: My right hon. Friend is right. We look forward with interest to what the Glover review will deliver, because it is an opportunity to look at our most precious landscapes and to see whether we are protecting them in the right way. We have an enormous number of designatory tools at our disposal, but they do not seem to stop the problems happening or result in our Environment Agency and other organisations cracking down on wrongdoing as much as they should. This is an opportunity to stand up for what we believe in on the natural environment and say, “Here is something really special, and we are going to get it right.”

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman, I and many others in the Chamber agree on and appreciate the wonderful work of the National Farmers Union and the Northern Irish Ulster Farmers Union on habitat, climate change, their commitment to carbon zero and many things. Should we not have on record in this debate the good work of the NFU and farmers who are committed to changes to make things better and preserve the environment for the future, which he and I believe in?

Richard Benyon: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Perhaps I can conclude by entirely endorsing what the farming unions of these islands have agreed, and Minette Batters’ very brave and clear statement about moving to net zero considerably before the rest of the country and making sure that agriculture fulfils its responsibilities. Part of that is about looking at catchments and saying, “How can we lock up more carbon?” The clear, easy way of doing that is to have a more broken-up mosaic of land use, which includes grass as part of the rotations. With encouragement for minimum tillage, not only can we start to see more carbon being locked up, but our rivers will be protected from many of the things that are causing problems at the moment.

8.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I genuinely apologise to the House for not being here at the start of this important debate, because I know how passionate right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken about this issue are. One of the joys of being the Minister responsible for the Environment Agency is seeing that the environment matters to so many people in different ways and seeing the important role of the Environment Agency. I hope, by the end of the debate, that I will have been able to persuade hon. Members and those still watching—there were four people in the Public Gallery at the start of it—on this matter, including Feargal Sharkey who is a great advocate of what we need to do to support chalk streams. The Environment Agency also has other roles and I was stopped on the

way here to talk about Grenfell and some of the situations in which we are involved there. I apologise to the Chamber for that.

I have had three years in this very special role as Minister for the environment. I am very fortunate that, by and large, neither an official drought nor an official flood has been declared. I am conscious of the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on what happened recently in Wainfleet; I visited his constituency to discuss floods. The issues that have been raised about drought worry many of our farmers around the country, who are also considering the impacts of abstraction reform. I am very conscious that my constituency of Suffolk Coastal is one of the driest in the country. That said, at the Latitude festival, which was held this weekend in my constituency, they had a hailstorm, in the middle of July. Who would have thought that in Suffolk, when we are all having a heatwave? It just shows how important it is that we look after the habitat that is special to our country and to our world, while the impacts of climate change do what they do.

I will come to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) shortly, but I want first to refer also to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who was in the Chamber for much of the debate, because he has one of the most special chalk streams in his constituency—the River Test, which many people have mentioned and in fact fished in, including my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). The Test is regarded as one of the most special chalk streams in the country, as right hon. and hon. Members will recognise. I used to live in Whitchurch, which is 2 miles from the source of the river, so I am well aware how special it is.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne on securing today’s debate. It is well known in the House that he is an active champion of chalk streams and that he recognises their importance for nature and for good fishing. I will never forget the day after the 2017 election, when I was not sure if I would be reappointed to this role, when I joined him in Hampshire on the River Itchen. He had a good day’s fishing and I had a good day being shown around by the WWF and being told about the importance of chalk streams. Having lived in Hampshire, I was aware of this, but it brought to my attention some of the particular challenges that the Environment Agency regularly faces from water companies wanting to abstract more water further upstream, which has a damaging impact on the environment and the flow, as others have mentioned, as well as on the quality of fishing. That is when I met the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas), who was also very passionate on this topic, which is why he contributed to the debate on 12 December 2018 on the Thames Water reservoir in Abingdon and why he strongly supported that measure.

On this matter, I have been given a very strong message by my civil servants, who are in the Box and provide excellent advice, and I am conscious that the water resource management process has not yet been finalised, but I can genuinely say, even though the Secretary of State has not yet agreed the plans, that I believe that Thames Water and Affinity Water, both of which are promoting the reservoir in their preferred plans, will receive a very warm welcome when they are

[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

put forward, so that, as many others have mentioned, we can finally get on with the Abingdon reservoir, which will do a lot of good for the people of south-east England. I am conscious that when speaking in the House I have some leeway with parliamentary privilege and that my comments will not prejudice any quasi-judicial decision that the Secretary of State might take in the future.

I return to the main topic of the debate. While chalk streams contribute to our health and wellbeing, they are principally unique habitats supporting a diverse range of invertebrate and fish species and have long been held in high regard for the quality of the fisheries they support. Only 200 chalk rivers are known globally, and it is amazing to think that 85% of them are found in the UK in the southern and eastern parts of England. It is well recognised, however, that our water resources are under pressure and that this pressure is growing as the climate changes and the demand for water increases from a growing population and greater housing need. As my hon. Friend outlined, our chalk streams are facing an unprecedented challenge, having been heavily affected by human activity, including abstraction, pollution and historic modification.

Mr Charles Walker: The role of Ofwat has not been mentioned yet. It has no duty to have any environmental regard. Its only interest is in driving down bills, but it should take a great deal more interest in the environment. I think we have all had enough of Ofwat in this place. I hope the Minister will take that on board.

Dr Coffey: I hear what my hon. Friend says. Ofwat is a champion of the consumer, and I hope that in its recent interventions with the water companies he will recognise some of the progress it has made, but I hear what he says. The Environment Agency challenged Ofwat in its initial 2019 price review over the fact that it and some of the companies that had come up with particular plans and made some good progress were none the less not fulfilling their environmental obligations. I am pleased therefore that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State last week met the water companies and challenged them by saying that, while we recognised the strength of the investment they had brought to the water industry in the last 25 years, they must not forget the environment and we would continue to press them on that point. I am pleased that the Environment Agency is pressing the case with Ofwat so strongly. I hope that the next Government, to be formed this week, will proceed with the environment Bill, which will strengthen Ofwat's powers. Who knows? There may be opportunities for even further consideration of a duty relating to the environment.

Mr Charles Walker: It is really important for there to be people in Ofwat who share the Minister's passion for the environment and the passion displayed by so many colleagues here, not only in this debate but in others.

Dr Coffey: I entirely agree, and I hope that that will happen. I think that the term of the current chair of Ofwat, who is a doughty defender of the consumer, is due for a short extension until 2020. I also genuinely believe that any future holder of the great office of Secretary of State—if that person is not our excellent right

hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), who has done so much for the environment and, indeed, so much in challenging water companies—will take that point into account.

Jim Shannon: No one has mentioned one issue so far tonight, but it is important for it to be on the record in *Hansard*. I refer to the issue of water leakages. If there is a demand for more water—which clearly there is—water companies need to address the issue. Will the Minister make that a priority, so that water is not wasted as it clearly is being wasted now, and we can use that precious resource much better?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. For several years there has been an economic calculation about the cost of repairing the causes of leakages rather than doing something else to keep water flowing. I will not say that the price of repairs is irrelevant, but it is not only the only factor under consideration. Water users struggle. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) spoke extensively about the water consumption of residents, and the need for us to consume less. If the water companies are allowed not to take the issue quite as seriously as they have been, why should the end user make a difference? I think that the situation is changing, but we need to recognise that the economics do not always add up.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, this matter is devolved. Our 25-year environment plan for England, which concerns reserved matters, sets out our commitment to protect our water environment and how we will do that, to ensure that there is enough water for the environment as well as for homes and businesses.

Our abstraction reform plan, launched in 2017, explains how we will ensure that abstractors can access the water that they need, and that there is enough water in our rivers, and groundwater, to maintain habitats and water quality. That includes reducing the damaging abstraction of water from rivers and groundwater, so that by 2021 the proportion of water bodies with enough water to support environmental standards will increase from 82% to 90% for surface water bodies, and from 72% to 77% for groundwater bodies. Earlier this year we published our abstraction reform progress report to Parliament, which shows that the Environment Agency is on track to meet those targets.

The Environment Agency has already reviewed thousands of abstraction licences, and has changed many of the most damaging. Seventy-one abstraction licences on 15 chalk streams across England have now been changed. Those changes will return 16 million cubic metres of water per year to the chalk streams, and will remove the risk of another 8 million cubic metres per year being taken. This is equivalent to the average annual domestic water use of approximately 200,000 people, the approximate population of Oxford.

Developing a stronger catchment focus is a key aspect of abstraction reform. The Environment Agency is now testing innovative solutions to protect the environment and improve access to water in priority catchments. The Cam and Ely Ouse and East Suffolk priority catchments both contain rivers that are fed by chalk groundwater. In these priority catchments, there are now stakeholder groups, which are made up of a wide variety of abstractors with an Environment Agency co-ordinator, who are

working together to develop and trial new solutions to address sustainability issues. I look forward to the Environment Agency launching more of these water resource catchments later this year.

The River Bulbourne in Hertfordshire is impacted by the Canal and River Trust operations including groundwater abstractions. The Environment Agency is presently negotiating delivery of recommended solutions with the trust. Affinity Water has also completed an investigation for the River Bulbourne and as a result will implement river restoration projects in the catchment by 2025, subject to its business plan being approved by Ofwat, and I see no reason why Ofwat will reject it. The Environment Agency's chalk stream partnership "Bringing Back the Bulbourne" has been an award-winning success story.

Turning to the River Kennet in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), the Environment Agency, working with Thames Water, has changed abstraction licences that impact the Kennet, Wye and Hughenden stream. This includes reducing Thames Water's licence at Axford to restrict groundwater abstraction when flows are low, revoking its Ogbourne licence, and investing in a £30 million pipeline that prevents up to 10 million litres of groundwater from being abstracted when river levels are low.

Turning to parts of north London and an issue not directly in the constituency of the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham but close to the heart of Feargal Sharkey, the River Lee below Ware weir lock splits between the old River Lee and the Lee navigation. The Loop was the original course of the River Lee and is the site of two fisheries clubs. Flows in the loop are influenced by the volumes abstracted upstream from the Lee by Thames Water and by navigation activities. The Environment Agency seeks to manage flows on the Lee between Thames Water, the Canal and River Trust and the Amwell Magna loop. Thames Water operates under a voluntary flow trigger to reduce its abstraction volumes. This assists with downstream flows but its abstraction is still a significant volume of the available flow. Thames Water has invested in habitat enhancement improvements in the loop, working with the fisheries and the Environment Agency.

Several contributors to the debate talked about the impact of dry weather on chalk streams. Some of our chalk streams are currently showing flow impacts that could be attributed to the prolonged dry weather we have experienced over the last couple of years. Impacts are visible in chalk streams in Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, north London, Lincolnshire and Northampton, but I have to admit that the national picture is variable.

The impacts we are seeing in chalk streams include changes to fish movement, a decline in the numbers of invertebrates and an increase in algae. The Environment Agency's current actions include leading and co-ordinating the National Drought Group, which brings together a wide range of stakeholders responsible for water and for those who need the water. This partnership includes water companies, the Government and non-governmental organisations, including the National Farmers Union, environmental groups and business groups. The Environment Agency also collates and monitors evidence of impacts of dry weather on chalk streams and actions undertaken to protect the streams.

If required, the Environment Agency will implement abstraction restrictions to protect the environment. For example, as we have heard, the Environment Agency is likely to implement restrictions in a number of places, including the River Stour catchment in Essex, which is a chalk stream. That will affect 16 abstraction licences, and there will be a reduction of 25% to their weekly abstraction limit. The Environment Agency is discussing these matters with individual abstraction licence holders in other parts of the country, particularly Hertfordshire, Berkshire and Herefordshire.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham referred to the designation of sites. The Government have designated 11 high priority chalk rivers as sites of special scientific interest to protect them from the pressures they are under and to begin work to restore them. Each of those 11 designated chalk rivers that has been assessed to be in an unfavourable condition has a river restoration plan. For the record, those rivers are the Kennet, the Nar, the Test, the Frome, the Hull headwaters, the Lambourn, the Itchen, the Wensum, the Bere streams, the Moors rivers system and the Avon system. By implementing these action plans, we have enhanced more than 40 miles of priority chalk river habitat through 60 projects since 2011.

Chalk rivers are protected from harmful effluent discharges by a rigorous permitting process. When an operator seeks to discharge effluent, they must first get a licence from the Environment Agency. In consultation with Natural England, civil society and the public, the agency will then grant the permit to discharge into a priority chalk stream only if the environmental risk is low. I am conscious of the example that was used earlier, and I will draw it to the attention of the Environment Agency so that it can investigate further the concerns about discharges.

Natural England has been delivering catchment-sensitive farming, offering a combination of grants and advice to help to reduce pollution from farms within priority catchments, including chalk streams, across the country. There is clear evidence that this advice has led to improvements in water quality and a reduction in serious water pollution incidents, and ecological communities have responded positively to the reductions in sediment pressure. However, it is important to stress that all water companies also have a significant role to play in protecting the environment. A large proportion of companies look after the chalk aquifer, which is the major aquifer of southern and eastern England. These companies include Thames, Affinity, Southern and Anglian. Apparently, South East is also included, as is Yorkshire, for some reason. This just goes to show how far the power of Yorkshire stretches, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton will know.

There are good examples of partnership work in action. The Environment Agency's work with Affinity Water to reduce abstractions at 11 pumping stations across seven chalk streams means that 70 million litres of water a day will be kept in the environment by 2025, and they have reduced abstraction from the River Mimram and the River Beane by over 40%. In the north London and Hertfordshire area alone, the Environment Agency is working to improve more than 150 miles of chalk streams by 2025. The agency also hopes to remove or bypass 50 weirs or other structures to improve fish passage and habitats in the north London area.

Sir Oliver Heald: When I spoke earlier, I made the point that builders and developers have suggested that it is possible for new homes to achieve water use of perhaps 120 litres per person per day. At the moment, in my constituency and others, the figure is about 175 litres. What does the Minister make of that? Does she think that such a reduction is realistic?

Dr Coffey: It is entirely realistic. Indeed, we want to go further and get the figure down to 110 litres. We believe that that is entirely possible, and I will address that further in my contribution, especially as the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) referred to it as well.

Work has also been done by water companies to improve the water quality of chalk streams, which my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne also identified as an issue. More than £3.4 billion has been invested between 2010 and 2015 to support the achievement of the water framework directive environmental objectives. I shall repeat that figure: £3.4 billion has been invested by the water companies. This has contributed to substantial reductions in phosphate pollution, to which chalk streams are particularly sensitive, and additional investment is proposed to secure further improvements. Water companies are also engaged in research to overcome technical limitations on phosphorus reduction. Additionally, 650 sewage treatment works across England, serving 24 million people, have phosphate removal in place, and many of them are on chalk streams.

The Government expect to see a multi-sector approach to managing water resources and want water companies to continue to engage in the catchment that they serve. We want them to take the lead on developing local catchment solutions to address the needs of all water users in their region. We are already seeing how this can work. I am particularly proud of Anglian Water, as Water Resources East is taking an innovative cross-sector approach and making important links to improve water abstraction management.

As my hon. Friend said, a large proportion of the water that is abstracted is for public supplies. Reducing the pressure on such supplies will also help to protect the environment. To do this, we need a twin-track approach of reducing demand for water, including driving down leakages, while increasing supply. That is why we recently launched a consultation, to which I hope my right hon. and hon. Friends will contribute, to understand by how much we can reduce personal water use by 2050 and the measures we need to implement to get there, including tightening building regulations, the labelling of water-using products and metering. This autumn, we plan to lay our national policy statement for water resources infrastructure, which will streamline the planning process for nationally significant water resource infrastructure projects, helping to increase water supplies.

I hope my hon. Friend will appreciate that Thames Water and Affinity Water are still developing their water resources management plans. They recently referred their statement of responses to their consultations to DEFRA, which the Department and the Environment Agency are assessing. That process is ongoing, and that assessment includes the proposed reservoir near Abingdon. The evidence from the National Infrastructure Commission is clear that new water infrastructure is required alongside

a reduction in leakage, and I welcome the proposals from Thames Water, Affinity Water and others to develop regional strategic solutions for the south-east.

We want to see water companies taking more of a regional approach to water resource planning. They will need to make an assessment of the needs of different water users, including the owners of new homes, and the needs of the environment. That will be informed by the Environment Agency's national framework, which is due to be published at the end of this year and will illustrate the regional and national challenge of water availability, as well as the needs of different water using sectors.

I am pleased to say that we have also consulted on legislative improvements to ensure that water companies' plans are informed by effective collaboration, taking into account the plans of regional groups. We also recently consulted on a number of additional legislative measures regarding abstraction. Ofwat, the Environment Agency, and the Drinking Water Inspectorate all recognise the importance of a regional approach, which is why they set up the water Regulators Alliance for Progressing Infrastructure Development—water RAPID—team to ensure a smooth regulatory path for strategic water transfers and joint infrastructure projects.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) mentioned several streams in his constituency, and he is a champion on this matter. Anyone who looks at his website will see the long list of actions that he has taken, and he is right to praise the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust for its important work. I have already referred to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire and the fact that I grew up in Whitchurch, so I know about the importance of the River Test. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham referred to the important Ox-Cam issue, and my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire is the Minister for that project and is aware of the importance not only of environmental issue, but of the water needs of households in that area.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne started to talk about windscreens, insects and so on, and the IPBES report recognises the biodiversity challenge that we face. The main problem is with habitats and the change in land use. Rivers also face challenges, and my hon. Friend is right to stress that. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) pointed out, 80% of species under threat of extinction are invertebrates, which is why we must cherish habitats such as chalk streams.

I should also point out to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire that the aerodynamics of modern cars also contribute to our seeing fewer dead insects on our windscreens, but we are also driving somewhat slower because we are complying with speed limits when compared with what we might have got away with in the past—not “we”; I should not attribute that comment to any person in this House. He also talked about soil erosion and no-till farming, and I completely agree with him and the others who made this point. They should be champions for no-till farming, but they also need to be champions for glyphosate, as the people who advocate no-till farming rely on glyphosate. Indeed, its existence is under threat from 2022.

Sir Oliver Heald: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr Coffey: I am afraid that I will not give way on that point, because I am still trying to answer the points raised by other hon. Members. We may still have time at the end of this debate, but I feel there is another time for another debate on the glory of glyphosate—I am sure that I will be slandered on social media tonight for having said those words.

My right hon. and learned Friend mentioned how long it has taken to get a new Thames reservoir, and I genuinely hope we will see the plan come forward soon.

The hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington referred to his childhood roots, and in this House it is always important to recognise that, although we represent very special parts of the country, we sometimes have our roots elsewhere, which I think makes us better politicians. I appreciate that he has stayed here to talk about the impacts. He also mentioned grey water resources and how they might help water consumption. Indeed, there is a theory that the consumer is not keen on grey water, and we might need to do more work to promote the use of grey water resources in the water challenge of new homes, which I am sure he will recognise are important to his constituency, as they are in other parts of the country.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham also talked about water consumption, and I hope she will participate in the consultation. Importantly, she mentioned the challenges faced by the River Chess and the River Misbourne. It is astonishing to hear that the average consumption is 173 litres, which we need to change. I am sure she will be an active champion on that matter, as we already know she is an active champion on behalf of her constituents when it comes to High Speed 2. She referred to a number of different issues, but I am conscious that her work on the possible impacts on Ox Cam will not have been lost on the Housing Minister, who was present for the majority of the debate—he had the wisdom perhaps to leave for my contribution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) told us of her intention to go up the River Chelmer on a canoe, and I hope she returns with a paddle. My right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury,

who I am delighted to say is leading a review on highly protected marine areas, does not forget the rivers and streams in his own constituency. Indeed, he referred to a number of them, including the River Lambourn.

On the number of years of drought—just make it rain—it is perhaps of some comfort to the Prime Minister that, in her three years in office, she has never had to worry about a flood or a drought. Who knows how long that luck can last?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury highlighted that 80% of species are invertebrates, which get ignored in our debate on the environment, and I am glad he is here today. He also talked about chemicals going into the water. That is important, and in the development of our chemical strategy over the next year, the Government will take account of how we get the balance right on chemicals, which produce much magic for our everyday lives, but we need to be very conscious of the impact they can have. Of course, he also referred to the River Kennet and to water transfer.

A number of issues have been raised about how we need to preserve these habitats, and I fully agree. The habitats in our country are so special. They are quite a small part of our British Isles, but they are so important to the world, which is why this Government will continue, in the 25-year plan, to make sure we pass on an environment that is in a better state than this generation inherited. We will do that domestically and internationally.

I thank the House. I know this has been a long debate, but one of the special things about this Chamber is that something that might seem quite parochial has huge global significance, and I am delighted to have shared this debate with so many right hon. and hon. Members tonight.

Mr Charles Walker: That was a great debate.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Indeed it was. Very informative indeed.

Question put and agreed to.

9.19 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 22 July 2019

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

NHS and Future Trade Deals

4.30 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 242300 relating to future trade deals and the National Health Service.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank Mr Byron Davis for starting the petition, which to date has attracted 166,998 signatures, including more than 200 from my constituency. The petition is entitled, “Don’t put our NHS up for negotiation”, and it asks the Government to,

“Please introduce concrete safeguards that will make sure our NHS is kept out of any future trade deals after Brexit.”

It goes on to say:

“Words aren’t enough—we want watertight protections that will keep our NHS off the negotiating table. Why is this important? When done well, trade deals can be good for the UK. They can help create jobs and build opportunities... But this plan would put our health service at risk.”

The Government responded on 17 June 2019:

“The Government has been clear: the NHS is not, and never will be, for sale to the private sector. The Government will ensure no trade agreements will ever be able to alter this fundamental fact.”

The Department for International Trade went on to provide a detailed 491-word response to the petition, which can be found on the Petitions Committee website. It includes commitments such as:

“the NHS is not, and never will be, for sale to the private sector, whether overseas or domestic.”

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): This is a crucial debate. The Government have already awarded £9 billion-worth of contracts. Section 75 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 is the biggest threat to the NHS, as it opens up the whole NHS to the market. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must urgently repeal section 75 to safeguard our NHS?

Mike Hill: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, and I completely agree that the Government need to pay urgent attention to that.

The Government’s response continued:

“the Government will continue to ensure that decisions on how to run public services are made by UK Governments, including the Devolved Administrations, and not our trade partners.”

It also said:

“Trade agreements do not prevent governments from regulating as they see fit, and they also do not require governments to privatise any services... The Government will ensure that nothing in our future trade agreements dilutes the powers of UK regulators to maintain the NHS’s position as the best health service in the world.”

However, as the petitioner says, words are not enough. By tomorrow, we will have a new Prime Minister; by the end of the week, we will probably have a new Cabinet, a new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and

possibly a new Government position on these matters. Although we hear time and again, from across the Benches, support for the great institution that is the national health service and for its abiding principle of being free at the point of need, those are only words without deeds.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on opening this debate. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) that the Government should repeal section 75 as a matter of urgency, because if they do not, they will throw the national health service to the dogs. Nobody wants that to happen, particularly with predators such as Donald Trump’s Administration. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Mike Hill: I agree that it is truly a case of words, not deeds.

Although people may find it reassuring to hear the current Secretary of State for Health and Social Care say that the NHS is not for sale and will not be on the table in any future trade talks, we cannot take his word for granted. Equally, we cannot ignore the remarks to which he was responding. They were made by the US ambassador to Britain, Woody Johnson, in an interview with the BBC’s Andrew Marr. In that interview, he confirmed that in a trade deal with the United States, the whole economy—including the NHS—would be on the table. The shadow Health Secretary described those comments as “terrifying.” He went on to say:

“The ambassador’s comments...show that a real consequence of a no-deal Brexit, followed by a trade deal with Trump, will be our NHS up for sale.”

Others such as Nigel Farage, the leader of the Brexit party, have advocated a move away from state-funded healthcare to a more Americanised model. In 2014, he told UK Independence party supporters:

“I think we are going to have to think about healthcare very, very differently. I think we are going to have to move to an insurance-based system of healthcare.”

Whatever opinions, promises or pledges are out there, it is clear that if the NHS is not for sale, it must be protected and future-proofed against the outcomes of any trade agreements with the USA and any other nation state. That, simply, is what the petition asks for.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I support my hon. Friend’s comments about the petition. I am pleased that my constituency was in the top 10 for the highest number for signatures.

My hon. Friend is right to highlight the Government’s commitments. Indeed, the October 2017 White Paper on future trade arrangements said that the protections of EU free trade agreements would continue to apply in future trade agreements. Does he agree that we need to give some strength to those commitments and some assurance to the petitioners, along the lines of what the British Medical Association has requested, and that the Government and the Minister should thereby respond to the debate by committing to put into primary legislation a commitment that economic benefits cannot take precedence over public health policy in future trade agreements?

Mike Hill: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point with which I agree. The voice of the BMA and other professional bodies is most important and must be heard.

[Mike Hill]

The petition asks for the provision of “concrete safeguards” to keep NHS services out of any future trade deals. That is nothing new; that fight has been ongoing for years, even within the EU. To this very day, those British members of the European Parliament who care about our NHS are battling to keep NHS services out of the developing Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership between the EU and the USA.

The Government said in response to the petition,

“The UK’s public services are protected by specific exceptions and reservations in EU Free Trade Agreements. As we leave the EU, the UK will continue to ensure that rigorous protections are included in all trade agreements it is party to”,

but that can be only an aspiration. It is not a cast-iron guarantee that the transfer of any EU regulations into UK law will specifically protect the NHS from future trade agreements. Just as the EU found with TTIP, we will need to further regulate for the exclusion of NHS services from trade agreements. Action, not words, needs to be the order of the day. Given that the Government refused in 2016 to exclude the NHS from the TTIP negotiations, that may well turn out to be a tall order.

American healthcare providers can already compete to deliver services in the UK. However, the threat to the NHS of a US trade deal would be through clauses that lock in existing levels of privatisation and prevent future Governments from rolling them back.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is clear that the NHS is already for sale. Only recently, the urgent care centre in my constituency was put out to tender. It was recommended that a private, for-profit company should run that facility, which was previously an NHS service. As has been stated, a record £9 billion of contracts have been awarded to the private sector. Does my hon. Friend agree that the form of trade deal we are talking about would lead to privatisation with bells on?

Mike Hill: As always, my hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Let us not forget the millions spent compensating private companies that lose contracts and take the Government to court.

Trade deals are not only dangerous for the future of the NHS, as they would entrench privatisation, but undermine our democracy, as future Governments would be shackled by their binding provisions. That is why some say the only way to fully protect our NHS from trade deals is to fully exclude it from them.

Rachael Maskell: Does my hon. Friend agree that the riskiest point of entry for privatisation in our NHS is big pharma? Clearly, big pharma will seek to run other services in our NHS. It is essential that any trade deal takes seriously the threat big pharma poses to our NHS, given the service’s extensive drugs bill.

Mike Hill: Again, I agree with my hon. Friend and bow to her knowledge. We all know that pharmaceuticals is one of the major gateways to the potential privatisation of NHS services. I say again that the only way to fully protect our NHS from trade deals is to fully exclude it from them. As far as I and, I am sure, the petitioners are concerned, that is precisely what we should do.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Alex Azar, the US Health and Human Services Secretary, has said that Washington will use its muscle to push up drug prices abroad in order to lower the costs paid by patients in the United States. He said on CNBC:

“On the foreign side, we need to, through our trade negotiations and agreements, pressure them.”

Does my hon. Friend agree that we would see prices rise in our NHS?

Mike Hill: Undoubtedly, and we would be hostages to fortune. My hon. Friend makes a very important point right at the end of my speech. I reiterate that I believe, as I am confident the petitioners do, that we should fully exclude the NHS from trade deals.

4.43 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): It seems to me that we are debating that old chestnut, “public good, private bad.” We must take into consideration the fact that 7.6% of all NHS spending goes on what we might call private-type enterprises. They are not all for-profit enterprises; many are in the not-for-profit sector, such as community interest companies and charities. This issue is often portrayed as uniquely Conservative, with the suggestion that we want somehow to privatise the NHS, but all the facts, including the additional expenditure on the NHS in the past few years, demonstrate completely the opposite. In 2010, when the Labour Government left office, 4.4% of NHS spending went on the alternative, non-public sector. That figure is now 7.6%. The rate of growth has been exactly the same since 2010 as it was under the Labour Government.

I am sure that what underlies the petition is the petitioners’ fear of what might happen in future trade deals. One deal did not come to pass—the old TTIP, which the rest of Europe have decided not to pursue. I for one would very much welcome a future US trade deal, and I am sure we will be in a better place to negotiate one, given the rather sluggish way the EU seems to approach international trade deals. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for acknowledging that international trade deals generally are for the good; they expand investment and much more besides in terms of international relations. At the time of TTIP, the same fears emerged, with people asking, “Will our NHS be up for sale?” Love her or loathe her, Cecilia Malmström, the EU’s then Trade Commissioner, made it very clear that national health services were not on the agenda in the UK or anywhere else in the EU.

We saw something similar with the comprehensive economic and trade agreement with Canada, which is deemed to be what we might call best in class. It is seen as a good free trade arrangement, which, obviously, I would like the UK to have with the EU in the future. CETA is an advanced trade deal that allows for the sort of good things that happy, friendly trading nations can achieve, such as reciprocity on many qualifications, but that deal has always contained a specific exemption for Government-procured public services

“supplied in the exercise of governmental authority.”

I can only envisage that we would do the same in any trade deals the UK might make as an independent country. That is in our hands. That is for this place to decide.

This country has always been open for business. I do not know the figures, but we have very few restrictions on foreign ownership of our companies. I do not know

whether I use them myself, but frankly, I do not much care if an outsourced Indonesian company provides blood testing. I want the service to be provided at the best possible price and the best quality to the taxpayer. I am sure there are many services paid for by the NHS that are owned by foreign companies—American, French, German, Swiss, Swedish and so on. I really do not care too much, because what is important about the NHS is that it is free at the point of delivery. I am sure that in very many hospitals we enjoy equipment that is made overseas. We have the World Trade Organisation pharmaceutical tariff elimination agreement, so there are very few tariffs between any of the major countries on pharmaceutical products. We should take a wider view in these discussions than just, “public good, private bad”. We need some common sense.

Remarkably—this needs to be put on the table—many Opposition Members seem to want a customs union that goes on forever, and perhaps single market rules that go on forever. However, we would not have a seat at the table as the EU negotiated future trade deals around the world. We would be caught on the coat-tails of a customs union, just as Turkey has to suffer. We could find our NHS on the table in trade negotiations between the EU and the rest of the world on deals that, as customs union members, we would just have to follow. We would be completely powerless. To me, that would be the worst of all worlds. At the moment, our Parliament—Opposition Members and Government Members—will be in control of what is on offer.

Mike Amesbury: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify how many trade deals the Government have negotiated that include aspects of healthcare?

Craig Mackinlay: To date, obviously none, because we are not able to, but many roll-over agreements are coming to fruition. The biggest, which the Department for International Trade concluded just a few weeks ago, is with Switzerland, which is a major provider of both pharmaceuticals and high-level industrial equipment, which is often used in manufacturing and in our hospitals.

Agreements are rolling over gradually, but I want us to be more ambitious. I want us to have international trade deals that open up greater transparency and friendship and boost trade. If that means we start having zero tariffs on fantastic products from Japan or elsewhere, what is the problem with that? I want the health service in this country to be the best in class and free at the point of delivery. If UK companies are able to provide services internationally, that has to be a good thing too. But the decision on procurement and whether to open up the NHS to competition from America, Australia or anywhere else should be taken in this place. We should not be caught on the coat-tails of perpetual customs union membership, which would give us no decision-making power whatsoever. In the future, this should be a decision for us—for this Parliament, in consultation with the public and indeed the very good people who put their name to the petition.

4.49 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for introducing the debate and setting out the petitioners' concerns about this important issue.

I start by picking up the comments made by the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) that what we want is a matter for this House to discuss. It seems to me that this House, directed by my constituents and many others, is saying clearly that we do not want our NHS opened up to trade agreements and we do not want it exposed to international competition. That comes across very clearly to me as I speak to my constituents, whatever their views on Brexit. Everyone cares passionately about the NHS, and in the north-east we are about it especially. We have good services that we treasure, so my constituents are saying, “This is not for sale. It is not negotiable.” That is the setting.

As my hon. Friend said, words here are not enough. Earlier this year I took part in a debate on the Trade Bill during which we heard frequently that constituents were telling their Members of Parliament that they did not want the NHS to be opened up to competition or part of a negotiation. That message came through loud and clear. I am glad that people have been making that statement and making that argument time and again. We need to keep reinforcing the fact that when we are talking about trade deals, that is something “up with which we shall not put”. As I said, people feel strongly about it. The Trade Bill debate went into a great deal of detail, with the NHS being one of the recurring issues. The Secretary of State and the Trade Ministers who presented and wound up the debate were keen to say that the NHS was to be protected. It is excluded from EU agreements on services, and we would want to replicate that. However, whatever happens after Brexit, we will have to negotiate new trade agreements, with all the clauses and requirements involved, which requires a hell of a lot of detail. In any negotiation, there are at least two parties—often more—with their red lines. We have ours—the NHS must be one of them—and other parties have theirs. We have differing views and different agendas, but I think the petitioners are telling us that we really must stick to those red lines. On President Trump's visit, he made a statement about the NHS being on the table. Did he take it off the table again? We are clear that it is not on the table. It must not be on the table.

As my hon. Friend and the petitioners have said, just stating “the NHS is not for sale” is not the answer; fine words butter no parsnips. In all agreements, we need lots of detail clearly setting out how we will protect our NHS in many different circumstances. For example, there are currently charges in dentistry. How will we ensure that NHS dentistry is protected if there is already external private sector charging? Is it for profit or not for profit? We must also ensure that we can protect the existing overseas involvement in our NHS. There is a huge amount of detail. I have no doubt that a team of negotiators is looking at that, but that is the kind of fine detail that we cannot always get into when we discuss these matters in the House. It is crucial that we do get into that detail.

As we have heard, 7.3% of NHS expenditure is already spent on contracting. Many of us think that is far too much and that we should review it to ensure that we retain NHS services in-house, not because of the simplistic argument of “public good, private bad” but because we have seen too many failures of services. Yes, there are examples of good services, but plenty are not great. People will want to look at that angle. We need

[Liz Twist]

much more detail, and we need a strong debate and measures to protect our NHS. We need the headline commitments, which must be not just about having an NHS free at the point of delivery but about looking after the public and preserving our services in-house in the UK. In the Trade Bill debates there was lots of talk about scrutiny of trade deals. It is imperative that we have an open and transparent way of scrutinising any proposals.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) talked about concerns about the impact on drug budgets and big pharma, as well as the fear that this may be seen as a ripe opportunity for prices to increase. I have just come from the main Chamber, where we were talking about access to medicine and treatments for Batten disease. Cost is one pressure that, sadly, can result in many people with rarer diseases being unable to get access to medicines and treatments that would improve their lives and, in some cases, extend or save them. There is a real concern that we may see drug prices increase in the future.

The petitioners have a quite simple message, but it is one that people are hearing loud and clear and want us to reiterate. We must protect our NHS in the context of any trade agreements. We do not want our NHS to be privatised or outsourced—even by accident. We care about our NHS and we must preserve it. It is one of our great features. I thank the petitioners for drawing our attention to this issue.

4.57 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): It is great to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for securing this important debate. For people in my constituency, this issue is particularly timely. Last month, reports emerged that the Warrington and Halton Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust had begun to advertise a price list for operations that were previously free on the NHS. It offered 71 costly private operations, including vital procedures such as hip and knee replacements at over £18,000, cataracts at £2,368 and hernias at just under £8,000.

The fees were introduced as a result of Tory cuts, which are forcing the NHS to ration services that were once free at the point of use. The Opposition have consistently warned that such measures are leading to the gradual privatisation of NHS services, with vulnerable patients potentially forced to pay extortionate fees to cover medical costs. The pricing list was the first example of an NHS trust openly advertising private medical services in such a way. I was shocked to see the privatisation of our NHS advertised brazenly to my constituents, with the sick and vulnerable exploited for profit. It is an affront to the founding principles of our national health service.

I am pleased that, as a result of pressure from me, my colleagues and local campaign groups, the trust decided to pause and review the scheme. However, this is just a temporary victory, and there is no time for complacency. As we consider the bigger picture of our future trading relationships, there are great battles to be fought to defend our NHS from private interests.

In the same month that the price list was published, Donald Trump was invited to the UK at the behest of the Tory Government. Speaking at a joint press conference with the Prime Minister, he said the national health service would form part of negotiations over a possible future trade deal between the UK and the United States. To use his exact words:

“When you’re dealing in trade, everything is on the table.”

What an appalling thought—that our NHS is reduced to a mere bargaining chip in negotiations.

The Tory leadership candidates are too cowardly to stand up to Donald Trump. Last week, they refused to call his vile, bigoted attack on Ilhan Omar what it was: racism. That is not good enough. If the Tories will not stand up to Trump’s racism, how can they be expected to stand up to him in trade negotiations? How can they be expected to stand up for the NHS? They cannot.

After he founded the NHS, Nye Bevan said of Great Britain:

“We now have the moral leadership of the world”.

Today it does not feel like this country has any moral leadership at all. As always, we cannot trust the Tories with our NHS.

5 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for introducing the debate and speaking so well on behalf of the petitioners.

Let me start with a reference to Brexit, because I suspect that many of the concerns about trade deals, which may bring the NHS into play, will be driven by the loss of trade associated with Brexit. Let us remind ourselves of what the UK Government’s long-term economic analysis said. Under all the versions of Brexit that they analysed—the White Paper, the European economic area-type agreement, an average free trade agreement, and no deal—trade and GDP would be lower at the end of the forecast period than they otherwise would have been. The analysis went on to say that, under all those options—with the exception of the EEA, which does not apply—the situation would be worse if we had net zero migration from EEA workers. So before I come on to talk about trade, it is worth pointing out that we face a challenge relating to the retention and recruitment of staff if whatever Brexit we end up with drives a hideous and illogical end to the free movement of people.

The National Institute of Economic and Social Research’s analysis suggests that, depending on the type of Brexit, we could see a 22% to 30% fall in total trade. It went on to suggest that a free trade agreement with Brazil, Russia, India, China and all the major English-speaking economies, including the USA, would result in an approximately 6% uplift. I suspect that, if Brexit happens, Government thinking will end up being that, in order to make up some of the losses, we will have to have a quick win—a quick gain—probably with the USA. It is hard to see, for a variety of reasons, why the NHS would not be included in that.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is very concerning that, when the President was here on his state visit, he seemed to say that that was the No. 1 priority, despite the fact that our Prime Minister tried to deny that on the day?

Stewart Hosie: It was concerning that his initial response was, “Yeah, sure, the NHS—everything is on the table.” It was clawed back slightly the next day, but one wonders whether he understood what he said on the first day, or even what he said on the second day. The concerns out there among the public are very real, for the reasons I have set out. If we need to make up trade gains from the losses that almost every single forecast suggests we will have, it is hard to see how the NHS, or broader aspects of health, might not be included in some kind of trade deal.

The starting point for me is that we should not be contemplating exposing the NHS through trade deals, not least because the EU has made more trade deals with third countries than any other bloc, which we benefit from, and it has done so while protecting public services. It makes little or no sense to throw that away. The EU has protected public services such as the NHS in all trade negotiations. It has shown itself to be principled in its approach. Not only would we potentially lose access to those markets, but we do not have the means to replicate the agreements we already benefit from. The hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) mentioned the Swiss deal, but it was of course not rolled over in its entirety. Indeed, a number of the reports that came out at the time said:

“The deal risks new limits on the export of agricultural products from the UK to Switzerland—for example, a possible ban on organic products...Switzerland may no longer recognise UK businesses as ‘authorised economic operators’, eligible for lighter controls at the Swiss border.”

At the same time, a second roll-over deal was announced—the Norwegian one—but while it included zero duty for industrial goods, it did not include services. It was described in the Norwegian press as a “crisis agreement”, and it did not cover technical regulations and rules for trade in food, animals or plants.

I mention those two because they highlight the UK’s weakness in the Brexit process. If we are not able to roll over in full with friendly countries with which we have long trading relationships, how on earth are the public expected to believe that we will be able to cut a deal with the USA to make up some of the losses from Brexit without having to sacrifice the NHS? On my last visit to the United States, I was told time after time that the UK will be required to put everything on the table, and the US will be required to put nothing on the table.

Catherine West: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. Does he agree that one sector for which there will be implications is research and innovation? Is he as concerned as me about the prospect that a lot of our universities and the collaborations they do, which are in effect services, will be at risk? It will take an awful long time and an awful lot of effort to replicate them in a US trade deal.

Stewart Hosie: I am concerned about that. I am concerned that, even now, we are seeing relationships, partnerships and academic work being restricted, and doubt being cast on their continuation, for those very reasons. It would be tragic if health improvement work was not done or was lost from the excellent universities that undertake those studies.

The weaknesses that I speak about are where many of the concerns about the NHS lie, particularly in relation to a US-UK deal. They drive the impression, rightly or wrongly, that the UK will be involved in some kind of

investor-state dispute settlement mechanism, and that Governments or other public bodies could be sued simply for protecting our health service.

I will give three examples to demonstrate why there are real concerns and why the public are extremely anxious. The first took place between 1995 and 1997. The Canadian Government banned the export of polychlorinated biphenyl waste to comply with obligations under the Basel convention, to which the US was not a party. The waste treatment company SD Myers then sued the Canadian Government for £20 million in net damages under chapter 11 of the North American free trade agreement—an ISDS-type arbitration scheme. That claim was upheld under NAFTA, even though Canada had taken action to remain in compliance with an international treaty.

In the second case, in 1997, the Canadian Parliament again banned the import and transport of the petrol additive methylcyclopentadienyl manganese tricarbonyl over concerns that it caused a significant public health risk. Ethyl Corporation, the manufacturer of the additive, sued the Canadian Government, again under NAFTA chapter 11, for \$251 million to cover losses resulting from what it called the “expropriation” of its plant and to its “good reputation”. That action was upheld by the Canadian dispute settlement panel. The Canadian Government repealed the ban and paid Ethyl Corporation \$50 million in compensation.

Cases that involve toxic polychlorinated biphenyl waste and a petrol additive that was deemed to have a public health impact were overturned. It is quite wrong for any corporation to be able to sue a Government simply for taking steps to protect the wellbeing of their citizens. I use those two examples on purpose; they may not have a direct clinical NHS procurement characteristic, but no one could doubt they were public health measures that were overturned as a result of a trade deal that allowed private investors to do certain things.

My final example is more local. Some time ago in Scotland, we had an increase in the prevalence of hospital-acquired infection. One of the actions the Scottish Government took was to remove private cleaners and return cleaning to NHS staff. Lo and behold, the incidence of hospital-acquired infection reduced dramatically. It does not take an enormous leap of the imagination for non-core work, such as cleaning, to be put out for competition. Had that been an international company, utilising an ISDS-type arbitration scheme, one can easily see how it may have sued the Scottish Government to win back that work and continue to make profit, irrespective of the health consequences.

I have heard what the petitioners have said, and I welcome the commitments made so far that the NHS will not be included in any future trade deal. However, it would be foolish not to recognise the concerns the public have or that fraying around the edges, when it comes to what appears to be non-core, non-clinical work, can still lead to the kind of problems the petitioners are concerned about. I await with interest what the Minister says. I congratulate those who signed the petition and brought this important matter before us today.

5.12 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill)

[*Judith Cummins*]

on opening this important debate and speaking so eloquently on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I thank hon. Members who contributed to the debate, including my hon. Friends the Members for York Central (Rachael Maskell), for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid), as well as the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay).

The petition calls on the Government to categorically rule out including the NHS in future trade deals. It has been signed by more than 166,000 people, while another petition organised by Keep Our NHS Public has been signed by more than half a million people. Last week the Government published a summary of responses to their consultation on trade negotiations with the US, Australia and New Zealand, as well as potential accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. Over 600,000 people responded, with an overwhelming number of those responses calling explicitly for protections for the NHS in trade deals.

The British public are absolutely clear: they do not want the NHS to be bargained away as part of a trade deal, they do not want companies to have the right to sue our Government for decisions taken in the interests of public health, and they do not want drug prices to be pushed up by American pharmaceutical giants. We on the Labour Benches firmly agree with that. We are extremely proud of the Labour-created NHS and we know how important it is to the people of the United Kingdom. We will always defend the principles of universality and the NHS being free at the point of use.

A number of hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Hartlepool, for Coventry South, for Blaydon, for Warrington South and for Hornsey and Wood Green, mentioned the comment made by the President of the United States when he said the NHS would be “on the table” in any US-UK trade deal. A few hours later, perhaps after some encouragement from the current Prime Minister, he appeared to row back somewhat. On Wednesday we are entering a brave new world, with a new Prime Minister. The person almost certain to be that new Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), has repeatedly stated that he regards concluding a quick trade deal with the US as an absolute priority. So this is a timely debate and one that will no doubt continue in the coming months and years.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon made the point that the NHS cannot be part of trade deal; that is her red line. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South spoke about our moral duty. In my remaining time, I want to mention a number of areas where aspects of trade deals could threaten the NHS if proper safeguards and guarantees are not put in place. I will then turn to the importance of the proper scrutiny of trade deals, both in Parliament and more generally, to ensure that no Government can put our NHS in danger.

First is the risk that trade deals could increase and consolidate privatisation of the NHS. Services chapters in free trade agreements typically include provisions

that lock in liberalisation measures, such as privatisation. There is genuine concern that trade agreements could force us to lock in market liberalisation of the NHS, so that future Governments are unable to bring these services back in house. The move from positive lists, where only listed services are subject to liberalisation, to negative lists, where all services are deemed open to liberalisation, unless explicitly excluded, makes that significantly more likely.

Under the negative list system, the UK would have to explicitly opt out all healthcare and related services. If we did not, it could be difficult to ever bring privatised services back in house. In my area of Bradford, I am fighting alongside Unison to stop the creation of a wholly owned company for NHS staff such as cleaners and porters. If this goes ahead, and we agree a trade deal without the correct exceptions, bringing those services back into the NHS will be even more difficult and complex.

There are similar concerns about the inclusion of ISDS procedures in trade agreements. The threat of Government or NHS bodies being sued under ISDS, for example for bringing a service back in house, can have a major chilling effect on public policy decisions. There are numerous examples of this around the world. The Labour party has taken a clear position on ISDS. We do not think it is necessary and we do not think it is right. We believe there are many alternatives that balance the need for investor protection with proper guarantees, so that Governments can make public policy decisions without fear of corporate legal action.

A potential deal with the US is of major concern in respect of drug pricing. Last year, President Trump accused the rest of the world of freeloading on the US, resulting in high drug prices in the US. He claimed that:

“When foreign governments extort unreasonably low prices from U.S. drug makers, Americans have to pay more to subsidize the enormous cost of research and development”.

In particular, he blamed countries that

“use socialized healthcare to command unfairly low prices from U.S. drug makers”.

The NHS purchases drugs in significant volumes and therefore uses its bargaining power to set the price at the lowest possible levels. When the Office of the US Trade Representative published an outline of negotiating priorities for a US-UK trade deal in February, it included in a section entitled “Procedural Fairness for Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices” a statement that the US would

“seek standards to ensure that government regulatory reimbursement regimes are transparent, provide procedural fairness, are non-discriminatory, and provide full market access for U.S. products”.

The threat here should be evident. The US Secretary of Health and Human Services put it even more starkly when he said that the US would “pressure” other countries through trade negotiations,

“so we pay less, they pay more.”

The Government may say that that is not what they intend, but we must recognise the very real risk that, in the rush to complete a trade deal with the US, it will happen—a case of marrying in haste and repenting at leisure. In negotiations with Australia and New Zealand, the US has already tried to force changes to their medicines pricing policies. In those cases, the US backed down to achieve other trade objectives, but that is highly unlikely to be the case with the UK, given the size and scope of the NHS’s purchasing power. That could lead

to higher prices and less choice for the drugs the NHS needs. The effect on the NHS would be significant and potentially devastating for patients.

As many hon. Members have made clear, there are numerous and credible threats to our NHS in potential future trade agreements. That is why parliamentary scrutiny of trade agreements is critical. We in the Labour party have repeatedly pushed for the Government to bring forward an inclusive, transparent and meaningful system of scrutiny and accountability. We tabled amendments to the Trade Bill and the Lords passed amendment 12 to the Bill, which secured Parliament's right to vote on the mandate and to have a meaningful debate on any signed deal before ratification. Alas, it seems that the Trade Bill has disappeared. Can the Minister confirm today whether it will ever see the light of day again? It must be this Parliament's right to scrutinise and approve trade deals and it is our duty to protect the NHS in trade agreements.

To finish, I thank all my hon. Friends who have made it clear that we in the Labour party will not allow our NHS to be sold off as the price of a quick trade deal. The NHS is more than a service; it is one of our proudest national institutions, and we must defend it with all we have.

5.21 pm

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for opening the debate and representing the more than 160,000 petitioners who put their signatures to the document.

It is clear that the NHS is something that all of us here and the public as a whole care deeply about. There can be no doubt about that. We have heard and seen it in many forums before and we know it is true. However, I want to set this out right at the start, because I do not want there to be any room at all for ambiguity: I guarantee the House that the Government will protect the NHS in trade negotiations. That means no requirement to increase private provision, no allowing American companies to ramp up drug prices, and no undermining the safeguards on healthcare data. That is a guarantee that I, the Secretary of State and many others have repeated on many different occasions—most recently, when I appeared before the International Trade Committee last week and said the self-same thing there.

The NHS is an excellent healthcare system. It tops the Commonwealth Fund's rankings of the best healthcare systems in the world. More than that, it is there for all of us when we need it the most. Those are not just words. Many of us—probably all of us—have an "NHS story" to tell of a time when the NHS helped us or those we love. I am afraid that mine is a story of when the NHS could not be there for someone.

I am married to an American. My brother-in-law could not afford proper healthcare for his illness because his insurance broker made the mistake of not renewing his health insurance for one week. There was one week's gap, and in that one week he was diagnosed with a brain tumour and was thus both uninsured and uninsurable. I do not particularly want to elaborate on all that the family went through and faced over the next three years of his life, but it was pretty miserable. I was convinced before that it was only civilised to have the sort of

system that we have here in the UK, and that experience did nothing but reinforce that view. It is simply not civilised not to provide healthcare for our citizens when we can afford to do so. The US health system is one where even those with insurance can never be sure whether their insurance will pay out; where insurance policies can often be limited in extent, condemning families to penury even when they started with quite a lot; where people with insurance routinely do not seek help at all because of the excess policies and where those who cannot afford to cover themselves are left to depend entirely on charity at best, or at worst are wholly abandoned.

As hon. Members might imagine, I want to protect the NHS and so do this Government. I cannot imagine a Government who would not want to do so. I have also called both campaigns today to make absolutely certain that the candidates whose names are on the ballot paper for leadership of the Conservative party also agree with that position—just to be 100% sure. Of course, they do both take that position.

Even if there ever were a proposal to pursue such a course, I think we in this room all know that, quite rightly, the British people simply would not have it. More than 160,000 people signed the petition that we are discussing today, and only last year a YouGov poll found that more than two thirds of people thought the NHS was Britain's greatest achievement. Given that strength of feeling, why would this or any future Government who purported to represent the people use trade deals as some kind of back door to privatise the NHS? It just does not make any sense in anybody's language. Even if a Government tried to do so, how would a trade deal get through Parliament? Not only could it not be ratified without scrutiny by Parliament, but there is separation between international and domestic law in our constitution, so any changes made to the NHS through a trade deal would need domestic implementing legislation, not just in England, but in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. There is no back door here to sidestep Parliament. So much would have to change in our domestic legislation, and I cannot see any way—even if a Government were to decide they wanted to do things that way—that it could actually happen. The good news is that nobody has any intention to use free trade deals in that way anyway.

I simply ask that we agree that there is no prospect whatever of any British Government of any colour or flavour seeking to privatise the NHS by the back door. Can we please put that one to bed? There are perfectly legitimate reasons to discuss issues around the NHS, which I will come to in a moment, but let us please stop scaremongering and pretending that the Government are about to try to privatise the NHS. It is not going to happen.

So what about the particulars? How we protect our public services in trade deals is well known. We already have multiple layers of protection around the NHS and all our public services. The WTO's general agreement on trade in services explicitly exempts services that are "supplied in the exercise of governmental authority".

The trade in services aspects of all agreements to which the UK is currently a party explicitly set out exceptions and reservations for public services. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) pointed out that Cecilia Malmström, the Trade

[George Hollingbery]

Commissioner for the European Union, issued a letter at the time of TTIP making that absolutely crystal clear to anybody who wished to read it. She said that people could object to any number of things about TTIP in all sorts of ways, but the one thing they could not do was pretend that this was a way for US health interests to take over publicly provided health services in the European Union. It plainly was not.

No trade agreement has ever affected our ability to keep our public services public, and no one has ever forced us to change the way we run them. The Nuffield Trust, which is one of the most respected commentators on healthcare in the UK, has pointed out that:

“A trade deal would not have the power to stop the NHS being a free, universal service.”

I think it was the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who is no longer in her place, who made a point on section 75 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012. The Act was not about privatisation, but about placing the financial power to change health services in the hands of the NHS professionals whom the public trust most, and putting clinicians, rather than politicians, in control of healthcare. The 2012 Act did not introduce competition into the NHS; previous Governments introduced competition as a core part of their earlier reforms. The Act established a level playing field in which any qualified provider can provide NHS-funded services, to encourage greater diversity in supply and improve patient choice.

I ask Members to consider for a moment where they think NHS procurement and provision finishes and starts. I cannot imagine a world where we would not buy our pharmaceuticals from the private sector. There is no Government in the world—other than perhaps the Cuban Government—who design pharmaceuticals. Is it suggested that outsourcing accounting is somehow a bad idea? How different can accounting for the NHS be, honestly? What about building hospitals? Does that have to be done by the NHS? What about the equipment used in operating theatres? Does it have to be provided by the NHS? I think we all know that there are areas where it makes sense for the private sector to be involved.

Like the hon. Members who have spoken in the debate, I have no particular interest in the private sector providing actual straightforward healthcare. There are some cases where even that seems sensible. Perhaps if there is not capacity in a certain area of expertise and the capacity exists outside, it might be right to commission it. I think we can all agree that there are some areas around the national health service where there will always be provision by the private sector, because that simply makes more sense.

It is said that investor-state dispute settlement mechanisms would allow foreign firms to take the UK to court for not opening the NHS up to further competition. That, of course, is a concern, but it is not the truth. Let us be clear: ISDS does not and cannot force the privatisation of public services. The mechanisms only provide protection for established investments that companies have made in a partner's market. At the end of 2017, UK businesses and investors of all sorts had around £1.3 trillion invested around the world, so those protections can be crucial, particularly where legal jurisdictions are perhaps a little less rigorous than they are here.

Catherine West: The Minister is being generous in giving way. Does he agree that there are precedents where companies, such as tobacco companies, have taken elected Governments to court and wasted, in private courts, a lot of money that could have been spent on public services, and that that is a serious dent in democracy as we know it?

George Hollingbery: The hon. Lady anticipates exactly the section of my speech that I am about to come on to.

I was talking about the £1.3 trillion invested overseas and the fact that ISDS arrangements are incredibly useful in guaranteeing the delivery of justice of some sort for those who have invested under certain terms in less certain legal markets. However, they cannot force the UK to change the way we run our public services. The proof of that—I hope that this will answer the hon. Lady's question—is in the results. The UK has more than 90 bilateral investment treaties in place, yet there has never been a single successful ISDS claim against the UK Government on any issue. Nor has the threat of potential claims affected the Government's legislative programme. I therefore do not believe that there is a chilling effect. The UK Government have legislated exactly as they wished on every issue, despite those 90 bilateral investment treaties.

That is not to say that bringing services that have already been opened up to private providers back into public ownership might not lead to challenges. That is true, and we should not sit in the Chamber today and not admit it. Of course, that does not necessarily rely on ISDS agreements. In the UK we have perfectly competent courts, and I suspect that many people might pursue those issues through the regular courts under contract law. However, ISDS indeed provides another avenue. Even the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), recognises that compensation would have to be offered if any fairly let contracts were not honoured because of a change in policy. That much is clear, and we have heard him say so directly. However, that is wholly different from being able to force the private letting of contracts that a state wants to remain public. That cannot happen under any ISDS arrangement.

Another concern that has raised its head today is medicine costs, and the idea that a trade deal with the United States would raise the cost of medicines the NHS needs. Across all nations of the UK, we have an excellent set of systems that generate great outcomes for patients at an affordable price. We are proud of the way we assess the value of and agree commercial deals for medicines here in the UK, which is good for the NHS, for patients, and for companies that want to do business with us. We are absolutely clear that in any future negotiations we could not agree to any proposals on medicines pricing or access that would put NHS finances at risk or reduce clinician and patient choice—and what on earth would the incentive be? We have a system in place that works, ensuring that patients have access to medicines they need at prices that are affordable to the NHS. That is in the best interests of patients in the UK.

It is simply not a matter for the UK that the US is a highly fragmented market for pharmaceuticals and medical equipment, and so has reduced buying power. Neither is that issue a matter to be contemplated in any potential trade deal. There is no protectionism here; it is simply a

matter of market power. Ultimately, it is a matter for US domestic politics. If the US takes a different route, it will have more buying power. We have taken a different route, and we have much more buying power. I can think of a thousand different markets where the US has much larger buying power than us. Are we supposed to petition it suddenly in a US trade agreement to bargain away its buying power? I do not think so, and I do not see why it should be any different in this case.

Some people—not in this debate, but it is worth dealing with, as there has been so much interest in the debate, in terms of the number of signatories to the petition—have raised the related issues of patent protection, extensions and generics. There is a complex web of interactions around those issues. On the one hand, there is a need to allow innovation in pharmaceutical and medical technology research and, on the other, there is a need to ensure that when patents expire—I nearly said “when patents expire”; forgive me—generic or bio-similar alternatives are quickly brought to market. We will seek to balance those as we always have, in a way that stimulates research and innovation, together with the cost of supplying healthcare free at the point of use in the UK.

Let me turn to concerns about the potential use of NHS data. The Government take seriously the use and sharing of that data. I reiterate what the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care said recently:

“NHS data must always be held securely, with the appropriate and proper strong privacy and cyber-security protections.”—[*Official Report*, 18 June 2019; Vol. 662, c. 114.]

The Government will ensure that trade negotiations do not undermine the safeguards that we have in place around health and care data. Those safeguards allow the public to have trust in how and why their data is used, and it is incredibly important that we maintain them.

To be clear, free trade agreements of course have a role in data. At the Department for International Trade, we are tasked with ensuring that data flows on a legal, safe and secure basis. We would seek to review any rules in place to safeguard data, such as data localisation requirements, and ensure that they are not overly protectionist. However, that should not be confused with the data that actually flows. We set up the pipework, but whether or not the taps are turned on is a matter for the regulators. In our case, that is the Information Commissioner’s Office, which is entirely clear about the need for privacy and cyber-security.

I will deal with one or two other issues that were raised that do not fit neatly into the categories in my written speech. First, on FTA scrutiny, the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) will know full well that we laid a Command Paper earlier this year that made a full and generous offer on scrutiny. I am well aware of her party’s position on scrutiny, and I absolutely agree with her and her Front-Bench colleagues on the need for real transparency on and scrutiny of free trade deals. I absolutely understand about the incentives to control every part of the passage through Parliament by votes. I would happily sit down with her at some stage and talk through why I think that is perhaps not deliverable, and perhaps not exactly what she wants.

I am clear that we must have responsible scrutiny, and that the Government must be as transparent as they can under the auspices of an FTA. When negotiating an FTA, plainly there are things that we cannot reveal in public; otherwise, we simply give away any negotiating

advantage we might have. At the same time, there needs to be accountability to Parliament. I therefore think we are largely of one mind, at least on the principle, if not the actual solution.

The hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) chose very carefully the two examples he gave—Norway and Switzerland. They, of course, are two free trade agreements that the EU has with partners that have very close arrangements with it in any event, in other ways. It is precisely because of the relationships that they have with the European Union that they cannot match in a continuity agreement what they can match in an agreement with the EU. The fact that those agreements are not as comprehensive as they might be is a consequence of our leaving the European Union, not of our inability to negotiate or, somehow, a failure on the part of the Government. I think we have achieved remarkable amounts, given the circumstances that Switzerland and particularly the EEA countries face.

I shall comment briefly on positive and negative lists, ratchets and so forth. In the end, having taken advice and listened to arguments from officials one way and the other, I have to say that, on the whole, it does not matter a great deal whether the list is positive or negative; the only thing that matters is that it is right, so that the outcomes—what the agreements actually achieve—are precisely what the UK wants. We can either include everything on the list and strike bits out, or exclude everything from the list and allow things in, but it seems to me that in the end that is a nice distinction, in the legal sense, and that actually what matters is the effect when we have finished. This is something that people talk about a great deal. In the end, all I want to do is ensure that we actually get the outputs that we need.

I hope we can agree that the picture is at least slightly rosier now than when this debate started. The legal protections are there to provide robust protection for the national health service. The commitment from the Government is there to ensure that that remains the case. The opportunities are there for us to make the most of our world-class experience and expertise in healthcare and the life sciences. As we look back at all the NHS has given us—particularly after its 70th birthday last year—we can be hugely proud of our past, but we can also be extremely optimistic about our future on the global stage.

I shall finish by repeating what I said earlier. This Government, the two candidates for the leadership, the outgoing Prime Minister and, indeed, all of us on the Government Benches are clear that we have no interest in privatising the national health service. We do not want to use free trade deals to do that either. We understand the concerns of the petitioners, and I hope very much that what I have set out today gives some reassurance.

5.41 pm

Mike Hill: First, I thank the petitioners for raising this petition and the House of Commons Petitions Committee staff, who put so much effort into advertising the petition in advance of today. I also thank hon. Members for their contributions. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid), the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), the Front Benchers—the hon.

[*Mike Hill*]

Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins)—and all those who made interventions.

Our NHS trusts are in deficit and creaking at the seams. NHS leaders are already in the USA, including NHS leaders from my local trust, looking at best practice over there. If the Government's reassurances are right, the NHS will not be for sale, but as the petitioners rightly say, "Words aren't enough". We need the right checks and balances to protect us from trade agreements

and marketisation. Ultimately, as hon. Members have said, we need to consider revoking the Health and Social Care Act 2012 in order to protect those services that thus far have not been privatised.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 242300 relating to future trade deals and the National Health Service.

5.43 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 22 July 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Labour Market Reforms

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The good work plan sets out the Government's vision for the future of the UK labour market and how we will implement the Taylor review recommendations. It forms an integral part of the modern industrial strategy and this Government's long-term plan to boost the productivity and earning power of people throughout the UK and to develop better jobs for all. We are now delivering the next phase of the good work plan.

Flexibility has been a key factor behind the success of our labour market, but we are aware there are a small minority of employers who transfer too much risk to the individual, sometimes to the detriment of their financial security and personal wellbeing. The Taylor review termed this "onesided flexibility". The Low Pay Commission found that this was particularly relevant for low-paid, vulnerable workers and has made recommendations to the Government. We are committed to tackling the problem and on 19 July we launched a consultation with proposals to:

Provide a right to reasonable notice of working hours—with the aim to give workers more certainty about their shifts and work patterns so they can have more control over their working lives.

Provide workers with compensation for shifts cancelled without reasonable notice—the Low Pay Commission found that the practice of cancelling shifts at the last minute, sometimes on arrival at work or partway through a shift was not uncommon.

Earlier this year, the Government also consulted on measures to prevent the misuse of confidentiality clauses in cases of sexual harassment or discrimination in the workplace. This followed unacceptable cases of their misuse as evidenced in the media, inquiries by the Women and Equalities Committee and individuals' responses to our consultation. These cases highlighted the seriousness of abuse that has taken place and the impact this has had on the lives of individuals.

We have now published the Government response and will be legislating on the proposals we consulted on, and in some cases going even further. For example, for the first time, no provision in an employment contract will be able to prevent someone from disclosing information to the police or to regulated health and care and legal professionals. The proposals will increase clarity on the limitations of confidentiality clauses, increase protections for vulnerable individuals and ensure employers use confidentiality clauses appropriately.

The Government also recently consulted on proposals to extend redundancy protections for pregnant women and new mothers returning to work. We have now published the Government response to this consultation.

Any form of discrimination against pregnant women and new mothers is unacceptable and unlawful. Despite this, evidence from the Women and Equalities Committee, among others, suggests that new mothers are still being

unfairly forced out of work. We are therefore taking action and are committing to extending the redundancy protection period that currently exists for pregnant women for a further six months once a new mother has returned to work. The Government response also looks at how we can increase awareness among pregnant women and new mothers of their maternity rights. As part of this the Government will establish a taskforce which will make recommendations on what improvements can be made to the information available to employers and families.

The reforms we have announced are the next important step in delivering on the Good Work Plan, ensuring we have a labour market that is fit for purpose. We recognise that the world of work is changing and are delivering the necessary reforms to ensure the UK labour market can adapt effectively, and support the needs of both workers and employers.

Copies of the referenced consultations and Government responses will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and will be available electronically on the www.gov.uk website.

[HCWS1788]

Energy Policy: Net Zero Emissions

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): On 27 June, the UK became the first major economy in the world to legislate to reach net zero emissions by 2050.

Achieving this target will require significant changes in the way we produce, deliver and use energy. We will need to harness the power of innovation and new technology to ensure the energy system remains flexible and resilient. We will need to provide confidence to businesses across the country to invest in a greener future by maintaining clear and stable policy frameworks. We will also have to ensure that as we move to cut greenhouse gas emissions across the economy, the security of our energy supplies is never in doubt and energy costs are kept low for all households and businesses.

As we set out on the path to reach net zero emissions, the Government are today outlining a series of important reforms across the energy system. These include new approaches to how low-carbon infrastructure is financed, potential changes to the retail energy market so it works better for all consumers, a new strategy for tackling fuel poverty and significant changes to the way we set the detailed rules that govern the energy system.

The action we are taking today is only a first step. Continuous action over the next three decades by successive Governments will be required if we are to end the UK's contribution to global warming and inspire the necessary action at a global level.

The Government have today published the following public consultations and reviews:

Regulated asset base financing model for new nuclear projects

The Government committed in January 2019 to publish an assessment of the regulated asset base model as a means of financing new nuclear projects. We are today publishing that assessment as part of a public consultation on the regulated asset base model. The purpose of this

consultation is to set out the basis for our assessment and to seek views from a range of interested parties on how it could be implemented within the current energy system in such a way that allows new nuclear to be built at low cost to consumers. The consultation includes a set of core principles that have resulted from our feasibility assessment and considers important issues such as the approach to risk-sharing under such a model. This consultation will be open for responses until 14 October 2019.

Business models for carbon capture usage and storage (CCUS) projects

As we committed to in the CCUS action plan, we are today publishing a consultation on how we can bring CCUS projects to market in the years ahead. This is an important step in order to meet our action plan commitment of delivering the UK's first CCUS project from the mid-2020s. The consultation seeks views on possible CCUS business models for industry, power, and carbon dioxide transport and storage, as well as a framework to support hydrogen production with CCUS. The consultation sets out the risks that are inherent in first of a kind CCUS projects, and the possible delivery and co-ordination challenges of deploying CCUS at scale. This consultation will be open for responses until 16 September 2019.

The re-use of oil and gas assets for carbon capture usage and storage (CCUS) projects

This consultation fulfils the Government commitment in the CCUS action plan to identify existing oil and gas infrastructure that has the potential for re-use and to develop a policy to support the development of CCUS in the UK. It seeks views on whether Government should introduce a discretionary power for the Secretary of State to remove the decommissioning liability from previous oil and gas asset owners if assets are transferred to CCUS projects; and on changing guidance from the Oil and Gas Authority and Government to encourage owners and operators of oil and gas assets to propose a period of suspension prior to decommissioning in circumstances in which there is a reasonable prospect of the asset being acquired by a CCUS project. This consultation will be open for responses until 16 September 2019.

Flexible and responsive energy retail markets

The consultation is issued in partnership with Ofgem and sets out a vision for the future energy retail market, the key challenges which the Government and Ofgem wish to address, and the outcomes the retail energy market needs to deliver for all consumers. This includes how the regulatory framework may need to change to facilitate the introduction of innovative products and services that may face barriers today and could support our transition to a greener future. The consultation assesses the case for making reforms which could remove market distortions so as to improve the functioning of the energy retail market as a dynamic and competitive sector. The consultation also outlines how the energy retail market can benefit all consumers, ensuring they are able to secure a fair deal and receive a good level of customer service. This consultation will be open for responses until 16 September 2019.

Reforming energy industry codes

This consultation seeks to address the fact that the way the detailed rules governing the energy system are managed may be frustrating the shift towards a greener

future. The consultation suggests creating a new function to translate the Government's vision for the energy system into a strategic direction for codes, as well as giving code administrators more power to change codes, ensuring that vision can be delivered. We propose creating a new process that allows for greater agility in how codes and code changes are governed. We also set out an approach that will ensure we can deliver rules that are clear, accessible and simpler. This consultation will be open for responses until 16 September 2019.

Fuel poverty strategy

We are consulting on proposed reforms to the 2015 fuel poverty strategy to ensure that the actions we are taking to support people out of fuel poverty are as effective as possible. This includes a potential change to the way that fuel poverty is measured to ensure that we are able to include all those living in fuel poverty. We also propose making changes to ensure that those most at risk from living in a cold home get the support they need by aligning our fuel poverty policies with medical evidence. We are also proposing a new principle which would ensure that policies contributing to the fuel poverty target are complementary to other Government priorities such as the clean growth strategy. This consultation will be open for responses until 16 September 2019.

Capacity market five-year review and consultation on proposals for capacity market emissions limits

We are today publishing a five-year review of the capacity market mechanism. This review has found that the scheme is working effectively and performance against the original objectives has been achieved. In considering the future of the scheme, we propose focusing on specific areas of the scheme that will need to change as we maintain security of electricity supply while also moving towards net zero emissions. One of the first steps we propose to take is to implement a restriction on the most polluting types of energy generation, such as coal, within the capacity market by introducing new carbon emissions limits. To implement these changes, we are today issuing a public consultation on carbon emission limits within the scheme. This consultation will be open for responses until 2 September 2019.

Facilitating energy efficiency in the electricity system

Increasing our ambition on improving energy efficiency across the UK energy system will be vital if we are to reach net zero emissions. The electricity demand reduction pilot evaluation we are publishing today has concluded that energy efficiency projects are not yet ready to enter the GB capacity market. We are therefore publishing a call for evidence on market barriers to energy efficiency, and how we can create new markets for energy efficiency and secure its role in the wider energy market. This includes considering how energy efficiency could help reduce the requirement for network reinforcement and help compliment the growth in distributed generation. This call for evidence will be open for responses until 25 September 2019.

Funding for advanced nuclear technologies

In addition to the above consultations, we are today announcing that we are developing proposals to invest Government money in the creation of innovative small modular reactors (SMRs) which are less expensive to build than traditional nuclear power plants. As stated to this house on 17 January, we have received a proposal from a consortium of businesses, led by Rolls-Royce,

which has proposed a significant joint investment of more than £500 million focused on designing a first-of-a-kind SMR. The consortium expects to more than match any Government funding both by direct investment and by raising funds from third party organisations that wish to invest.

The Government can today confirm that the consortium's proposal has been accepted into wave 3 of the industrial strategy challenge fund. The challenge is to design a working model that could be operational by the early 2030s. We are looking to make an initial award of up to £18 million to the Rolls-Royce led consortium in early autumn 2019. This is subject to final decisions to invest, including business case and other approvals, and this consortium representing the best option for pursuing this technology. The Rolls-Royce led consortium believes this new technology could create 40,000 jobs at its peak and each power station could produce enough clean energy to power 750,000 homes.

This money is alongside up to £45 million to be invested in the second phase of the advanced modular reactor programme, with project bids currently under consideration.

The Office for Nuclear Regulation and the Environment Agency plan shortly to publish their modernised guidance for developers of SMRs on their generic design assessment, the process through which reactor designs are scrutinised by the regulators prior to further necessary regulatory steps, including site specific assessment and issuing of site licence and environmental permits, to enable subsequent deployment.

[HCWS1789]

Local Industrial Strategies

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): Our modern industrial strategy is a long-term plan to boost productivity and earning power for people throughout the country.

We set out to work in partnership with places to develop local industrial strategies. These strategies are central to our aim of creating prosperous communities across the country. They are being developed locally and agreed with Government, establishing a strong collaborative approach. They are long-term, based on clear evidence and aligned to the modern industrial strategy.

On 16 May we launched the first of these strategies—the west midlands local industrial strategy. We followed this with the Greater Manchester local industrial strategy on 13 June. Now, alongside local partners, we are launching the next local industrial strategies for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc (Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Oxfordshire and the South East Midlands) and the West of England.

The Oxford-Cambridge Arc local industrial strategies mark a major contribution to the Government's wider work on the Arc with their focus on driving productivity by outlining shared priorities across the region as a whole.

The four strategies set out how partners across the Arc will work to: harness the collective strength of the Arc's research base, driving greater collaboration in science and research; provide the skills needed for the

future economy; maximise the benefits of new transport, energy and digital infrastructure; improve business support and finance for high growth companies and encourage foreign direct investment; and take a natural capital planning approach to development, contributing to the clean growth grand challenge mission.

Buckinghamshire aims to grow the county's creative, space, advanced manufacturing and digital health sectors, building on the world-leading assets it already has such as the Westcott Space Cluster and Pinewood Studios;

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough aims to build an industrial ecosystem that is globally known for tackling the biggest challenges facing society, with interventions tailored to the needs of each of its sub-economies: Greater Cambridge, Greater Peterborough and The Fens;

Oxfordshire plans to build on the county's world leading science and tech clusters to be a pioneer for transformative technologies and sectors, with its overarching ambition for the county to be a top three global innovation ecosystem by 2040;

The South East Midlands' overarching ambition is to position the area as the "Connected Core" of the Arc, a place with the right R&D assets, business environment and networks to foster, test and commercialise new innovations.

The West of England local industrial strategy focuses on four key priorities:

Strengthening innovation and driving productivity by: Connecting researchers, businesses and residents through a Global Centre of Innovation Excellence, and testing new products and services through a new West of England network of living labs;

Supporting all residents to contribute to and benefit from economic success by: targeting support to communities facing challenges, tailoring employment and skills support and linking everyone to jobs, training and services through better physical and digital infrastructure that is accessible, sustainable and low carbon;

Providing businesses with the space, networks and skills they need to boost productivity, grow and thrive by: encouraging uptake of modern technology, management and leadership practices; including more regional providers in businesses' supply chains and widening access to public procurement for small businesses; and supporting low carbon business models;

Investing in infrastructure that reduces energy demand, lowers carbon emissions and is resilient to the impacts of climate change, supporting businesses to adopt new clean technology and energy efficiency measures.

Copies of these five local industrial strategies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1762]

CABINET OFFICE

Defending Democracy Programme

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The UK has worked tirelessly to build our democratic system and values. In recent years, events across the world have demonstrated that sustaining and defending a flourishing democracy is increasingly important.

Therefore, the Cabinet Office is co-ordinating work and expertise across Government under a new defending democracy programme, which has been set up to:

protect and secure UK democratic processes, systems and institutions from interference, including from cyber, personnel and physical threats;

strengthen the integrity of UK elections;

encourage respect for open, fair and safe democratic participation; and

promote fact-based and open discourse, including online.

The Government have already started to roll out measures as part of this. On 5 May 2019 we announced a range of measures to crack down on intimidation, malign influence, interference and disinformation.

Following the Committee on Standards in Public Life report, the Government have published the Online Harms White Paper, committed to a new electoral offence, and will legislate to clarify “undue influence” which includes acts or threats of violence to manipulate someone’s vote. The Government recognise that rising levels of intimidation in public life can stop talented people, particularly women and those from minority backgrounds, standing for public office. That is why we are taking action to confront it.

As part of the programme, we have also announced a plan for a consultation on electoral integrity, which will seek to address concerns around strengthening provisions which prevent UK democracy from foreign interference. This is something we would certainly invite parliamentarians and others to engage with as it goes forward and will publish in due course.

Though this is a Government programme, we want to work with people from a broad range of perspectives to inform our work. That is why we are inviting the views of parliamentarians, political parties, third party organisations, academics, regulators and others on the

programme and its outcomes. At the same time, we will continue to consider all the recommendations already made to the Government.

By taking a broad and inclusive approach, this programme can build a consensus on the way forward to continue to defend our democracy in the future.

[HCWS1772]

Conflict, Stability and Security Fund Allocations 2019-20

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): My right hon. Friend Lord Young of Cookham made the following written ministerial statement:

I wish to update the House on the progress of the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) for the financial year 2018-19, as well as to announce the initial regional and thematic allocations for this financial year 2019-20.

The CSSF is a cross-Government fund which uses both official development assistance (ODA) and non-ODA resources to deliver against both national security and UK Aid objectives, through security, defence, peacekeeping, peace-building and stability activity. In 2018-19, the CSSF spent £1,256.8 million against a cross-Government allocation of £1,258.8 million (99.84%). A further breakdown of spend against regional and thematic allocation, by Department and by discretionary and non-discretionary spend is included in the CSSF’s annual report for 2018-19, published today.

The report includes examples of successful programmes and results as well as ways in which the CSSF has made improvements. A copy of this document is attached and has been published on www.gov.uk.

FY 19-20 Allocations

<i>Allocation</i>	<i>Non-ODA</i>	<i>ODA</i>	<i>Total</i>
Middle East North Africa	£20.0 millions	£157.3 millions	£177.3 millions
South Africa	£17.7 millions	£89.6 millions	£107.3 millions
Africa (sub-Saharan)	£33.6 millions	£61.3 millions	£94.9 millions
Overseas Territories	£51.6 millions	£5.1 millions	£56.7 millions
Eastern Europe, Central Asia	£23.2 millions	£28.8 millions	£52.0 millions
Western Balkans	£7.5 millions	£36.0 millions	£43.5 millions
Americas	£0.3 millions	£11.8 millions	£12.1 millions
Good Governance Fund (Western Balkans and Eastern Europe)	£—	£35.9 millions	£35.9 millions
Asia Pacific	£0.3 millions	£5.2 millions	£5.5 millions
<i>Regional Total</i>	<i>£ 154.2 millions</i>	<i>£431.0 millions</i>	<i>£585.2 millions</i>
Migration	£10.0 millions	£17.5 millions	£27.5 millions
Counter Terrorism Programme Fund	£13.3 millions	£12.6 millions	£25.9 millions
Multilateral Strategy	£4.0 millions	£18.6 millions	£22.6 millions
National Security Communications	£2.5 millions	£—	£2.5 millions
Serious and Organised Crime	£3.0 millions	£12.0 millions	£15.0 millions
Commonwealth 18-20 Fund	£—	£36.3 millions	£36.3 millions
<i>Thematic Total</i>	<i>£32.8 millions</i>	<i>£97.0 millions</i>	<i>£129.8 millions</i>
Peacekeeping	£291.0 millions	£86.1 millions	£377.1 millions
MOD Deployed Military Activity Pool	£50.0 millions	£—	£50.0 millions
MOD Afghan Security— Operation TORAL	£110.0 millions	£—	£110.0 millions

FY 19-20 Allocations

Allocation	Non-ODA	ODA	Total
MOD Operation TOSCA—UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus	£18.1 millions	£—	£18.1 millions
MOD UN Operations in Africa—Operation CATAN (Somalia) and Operation TRENTON (South Sudan)	£19.4 millions	£—	£19.4 millions
<i>Non-Discretionary Total</i>	<i>£488.5 millions</i>	<i>£86.1 millions</i>	<i>£574.6 millions</i>
Corporate Delivery Support and Other (this includes Stabilisation Unit, Joint Funds Unit and pilot activities)	£—	£16.0 millions	£16.0 millions
<i>TOTAL CSSF</i>	<i>£675.5 millions</i>	<i>£630.1 millions</i>	<i>£1301.2 millions</i>

Attachments can be view online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statements/Commons/2019-07-/HCWS1763>.

[HCWS1763]

Electoral Integrity: ID Pilots

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): Today, the Cabinet Office published its evaluation of the 2019 voter ID pilots. The evaluation shows that a diverse range of local authorities delivered successful pilots. We know this because for the second successive year, the overwhelming majority of people who came to polling stations were able to cast their vote without difficulty.

When surveyed, people in areas testing the poll card model and the mixed photographic and non-photographic model were significantly more confident in—and satisfied with—the process of casting their vote after polling day. Perceptions that there were sufficient safeguards in place to prevent voter fraud at polling stations increased in areas trialling photographic ID and mixed ID models.

Locally issued ID was made available, free of charge, whenever an elector was unsure that they were able to produce the required ID. In Pendle and Woking, 100 such voters made use of the provision. Woking, who were piloting voter ID for a second year, found the number of people who did not return after being asked to present ID had decreased from 2018. Electoral administrators from Woking have inferred this may be due to local electors viewing the ID requirements as the new standard.

Alongside the Government's evaluation, the Electoral Commission will publish their evaluation on the voter ID pilots today.

Electoral fraud is an unacceptable crime that strikes at a core principle of our democracy, that everyone's vote matters. In our current system, there is undeniable potential for electoral fraud and the perception of this undermines public confidence in our democracy.

The success of both rounds of voter ID pilots shows voter ID is a reasonable and proportionate measure to prevent this, ensuring your vote is yours, and yours alone. The introduction of this measure across Great Britain will strengthen the integrity of our electoral system and give the public confidence our elections are secure and fit for the 21st century.

Both last year's pilots and decades of experience of Northern Ireland—including at the most recent local elections—show voter ID does not have an adverse effect on election turnout or participation. We remain committed to rolling out this effective anti-fraud measure and bringing the whole of the United Kingdom into line with Northern Ireland, which has required ID to vote in elections since 1985.

Running pilots again in 2019 allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of how voter ID will work on a wider scale, and what works best for voters before national roll-out. We will continue to look carefully at the evaluations from both the 2018 and 2019 pilots to help inform our next steps and shape how the final policy will look when it is introduced.

Attachments can be viewed online at <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-07-22/HCWS1767/>

[HCWS1767]

Senior Civil Service and Senior Military Pay Awards

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): I am today announcing the Government's decision on pay for the senior civil service and senior military.

The Government received the Senior Salaries Review Body's (SSRB) report on 2019 pay for the senior civil service, senior military and police and crime commissioners on 7 June 2019. This will be presented to Parliament and published on gov.uk.

Thanks to the Government's balanced approach to public finances, getting debt falling as a share of our economy, while investing in our vital services and keeping taxes low, we are able to continue our flexible approach to pay policy, allowing us to attract and retain the best people for our civil service and senior military.

We consider all pay awards in light of wider pressures on public spending. Public sector pay needs to be fair both for public sector workers and the taxpayer. Around a quarter of all public spending is spent on pay and we need to ensure that our public services remain affordable for the future.

It is also vital that our world class public services continue modernising to meet rising demand for the incredible services they provide, which improve our lives and keep us safe.

The Government value the independent expertise and insight of the Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB) and take on board the valuable advice, principles outlined, and constructive challenge to the Government's recommendations outlined in the report. The Government will follow the SSRB's recommendations, subject to a small number of differences which are set out below.

Within the current context there remains a need to take into account workforce requirements and affordability when making decisions on senior pay, as well as fairness in the approach for senior and junior grades.

Senior Civil Servants

SSRB recommendations set a 2.2% pay award with money allocated in the following priority order:

0.9% targeted at pay progression and anomalies

0.2% set aside for minima increases

1% increase for all SCS not benefiting from the minima increases, and those benefiting by less than 1% from the minima increases should be "topped up" to a 1% increase (estimated cost of 0.9% of the pay bill)

0.2% set aside to implement any specialist pay proposals.

The SSRB also recommended reductions to the maxima and commented on priority work to be undertaken for the 2020-21 pay award.

The Government accept the SSRB's recommendations in full with the following exceptions:

The overall figure should be limited to an average 2% increase in line with the figure contained in the delegated pay remit guidance. The reduction of 0.2% will be taken from the money set aside for specialist pay which we will not be implementing this pay year.

The Government accepts the recommendation to decrease the maxima for all pay bands, but to delay implementation of this to next year whilst further work is undertaken on capability-based pay progression to ensure the levels set are robust and there is a clear and positive narrative for reduction.

In addition to the above action for this year's pay award, the Government commit to:

Developing and evaluate a credible robust capability based pay progression system

continuing to review the SCS performance management system as a priority; and

keeping under review the impact of the interaction between civil service pensions and the current tax rules on recruitment and retention.

The Government will continue to engage closely with the SSRB to help develop our proposals further and invites the review body to contribute towards the further review of the senior civil service pay framework including the commitments made above.

Senior Military Officers

The Government has rejected the SSRB's headline pay award recommendation, and instead will implement a 2% consolidated pay award with effect from 1 April 2019. The Government has accepted the SSRB's recommendations on senior military salaries to maintain the 10% increase to base pay on promotion from one-star rank and to not change the current pay differentials for senior medical and dental officers.

Attachments can be viewed online at <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-07-22/HCWS1771/>

TREASURY

HMRC Powers and Taxpayer Safeguards

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):

Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) have a vital purpose, to collect the tax revenue that pays for the UK's public services and benefits system. The Government recognise that public trust is essential to a healthy and effective tax system. UK citizens must know that their tax authority is fair, careful and even-handed and that it adheres to those core values in all its work.

But citizens also need to be reassured that HMRC have the powers they require to ensure that everyone pays their fair share of taxes. In some areas, particularly where HMRC are faced with fraud, evasion and complex avoidance, those powers are necessarily far-reaching. It is therefore of great public importance that they are exercised in a way that maintains public trust, with appropriate oversight and operational checks and balances, and statutory safeguards that enable taxpayers to dispute HMRC's decisions or complain about their treatment.

I am grateful to the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee for its report "The Powers of HMRC: Treating Taxpayers Fairly" and for the opportunity to discuss these matters with them. I have also discussed matters of trust at HMRC in detail with officials and outside stakeholders, and I am today announcing several actions HMRC are taking to maintain and develop public trust in their operations.

Professional Standards Committee

The context in which HMRC operate is changing faster than ever before. New technology presents significant opportunities to make tax administration easier for both HMRC and for taxpayers. But it also presents new challenges, as a small minority of taxpayers who wish to escape paying tax seek new ways to find unfair advantages.

As HMRC adapt to these changes, it is important both that they continue to maintain public trust in their approach to new technologies, and that the powers given by Parliament are implemented carefully and remain subject to appropriate oversight and safeguards.

So HMRC will establish a new professional standards committee to advise the Commissioners of Revenue and Customs. The committee, which will take advice from a range of independent experts, will consider, among other things, issues relating to the implementation of HMRC powers. The committee will not consider individual cases or Government tax policies. HMRC will publish details of the committee's membership and terms of reference in the autumn.

Powers and Safeguards

The House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee proposed a review of all powers granted to HMRC since the conclusion of the powers review in 2012. I have considered this carefully and concluded that a full review of HMRC powers is not necessary at this time. The powers granted to HMRC since 2012 were properly scrutinised before being granted by Parliament. The Government's view is that they remain necessary and proportionate. I have, however, asked HMRC to evaluate the implementation of powers introduced since

2012 in relation to the powers and safeguards principles, engaging with stakeholders, including taxpayers and their representatives. This will be published in early 2020.

Adjudicator

The adjudicator's independent role in complaints handling is a core component of ensuring public trust in HMRC, and of HMRC's evolution as a service organisation.

HMRC will undertake a comprehensive review of the findings identified in the 2019 adjudicator's report and will publish the results of the review by the end of this year. HMRC are working with the adjudicator to ensure that they have effective mechanisms in place to learn quickly and appropriately from complaints and, if necessary, to make changes to their operational policy and processes.

To enable better access for taxpayers to the adjudicator service, HMRC are also developing a secure digital channel for complaints.

Support for Taxpayers

HMRC understand that some taxpayers will always need extra help in their dealings with them and that others may need additional support at a point in time because they are dealing with a difficult life event. Some taxpayers may become anxious or distressed as a result of compliance activities, or when they get into debt. Ensuring that people who need support are treated with empathy and dignity is vital to maintaining wider public trust in HMRC.

HMRC have provided tailored assistance to taxpayers who need extra help and those in vulnerable circumstances since 2014 via their extra support service and also work closely with the voluntary and community sector. Working with their new customer experience committee, and drawing on the experience of the committee's independent, external advisers, HMRC have recently embarked on a programme to strengthen the support they provide to taxpayers who need extra help. Importantly, this includes extending the extra support service to people who may need additional help to deal with HMRC investigations and to help resolve disputes wherever possible without litigation. HMRC will report on the effectiveness of these measures in their next annual report.

HMRC will continue to work closely with external representatives through their forums, such as the additional needs working group and individual stakeholder forum, to understand taxpayers' needs better and to improve support for taxpayers.

Transparency

HMRC have undertaken to increase transparency and enhance public trust by publishing more data and information about the exercise of their powers. HMRC will engage with stakeholders, including taxpayers and their representatives, to identify what further data and information HMRC should publish in support of these goals.

This year, as a first step towards that commitment, HMRC will expand the range of performance and management information they publish in their monthly and quarterly performance publications. Previous reporting focused on specific aspects of their telephony and post processes, for instance, call waiting and post turnaround times, as well as compliance yield figures. From August

HMRC will publish further information, including but not limited to, their debt management, registrations and repayment services.

Taxpayer experience

Compliance enquiries are a necessary and important feature of HMRC's work in collecting the right amount of tax. Maintaining public trust in HMRC requires that these enquiries are carried out, but also that they are done in an appropriate way. Compliance enquiries can be worrying for taxpayers and HMRC are committed to ensuring that their procedures are accessible and impartial and that HMRC officers treat taxpayers with professionalism and respect. This includes taking into account the specific circumstances of taxpayers.

HMRC are reviewing taxpayers' experiences during compliance enquiries. Drawing on taxpayer feedback, this work will look at how each stage of an enquiry or investigation can affect taxpayers. It will seek to identify improvements in the process and draw out appropriate common standards and expectations. This work includes a review of the content, language and tone of letters, to ensure that they are clear, courteous and tailored appropriately to the needs of the taxpayer, including those who need extra help. In this, HMRC are working closely with a range of stakeholder groups and forums to develop best practice, which should help HMRC to improve the way that they interact with taxpayers.

The Government will provide a further update to the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee later this year on all of the areas of work outlined in this statement.

[HCWS1785]

Off-payroll Engagements

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): In 2012, HM Treasury implemented a set of rules which required Departments' most senior staff to be on payroll, and to seek assurance in relation to the tax arrangements of their long-term, high-paid contractors who are off-payroll.

Reforms to IR35 off-payroll working rules in April 2017 require public bodies to deduct tax and NICs if the off-payroll worker works like an employee, compliance of which is monitored by HMRC.

Following a review of the rules, I have concluded that the off-payroll rules implemented in 2012 are now superseded by the IR35 reforms, and the requirement for Departments to include set contractual provisions and conduct an assurance process are no longer necessary.

However, it remains essential that board-level appointments and/or those with significant financial responsibility should be on the payroll of the Department or other employing body, unless there are genuine exceptional circumstances that do not exceed six months. The HMT off-payroll rules have been amended to reflect the outcome of this review, and updated guidance has been published on the Government website, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-tax-assurance-process-of-public-sector-appointees>

This guidance includes increased transparency requirements, whereby the duration of off-payroll engagements of board members and/or senior officials with significant financial responsibility is to be reported in Departments' annual accounts in future reporting cycles. This will replace the need for annual reviews.

[HCWS1774]

DEFENCE

Armed Force Pay Review Body Report 2019

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): I am today announcing the Government's decision on pay rises for the armed forces.

The Armed Forces Pay Review Body (AFPRB) has made its recommendation for the 2019-20 pay award of 2.9%. We are accepting this recommendation in full (to be implemented in September salaries, backdated to 1 April 2019), and I am today laying their 2019 report.

Last year, the Government announced the largest pay rise in nearly a decade for almost a million public sector workers. This year's award builds on this and focuses attention on increasing pay for the most junior sailors, soldiers, and airmen and women, to ensure that they continue to receive a living wage. Consequently, the basic pay for other ranks on completion of their initial training will now be £20,000. This pay rise of over 6% represents an increase of £1,140 for over 7,200 newly trained sailors, soldiers, and airmen and airwomen.

The pay award also represents an annual increase of £995 in the nominal average salary in the armed forces (which is at the Corporal level), as well as an annual increase of £769 in starting salary for an officer.

For all cohorts, this is in addition to the non-contributory defined benefit pension and access to incremental pay progression.

The AFPRB has also made recommendations on rises and changes to other targeted forms of remuneration and on increases to food and accommodation charges which have been accepted. Where applicable, these rate changes will also be backdated to 1 April 2019.

Thanks to the Government's balanced approach to public finances, getting debt falling as a share of our economy, while investing in our vital services and keeping taxes low, we are able to continue our flexible approach to pay policy, allowing us to attract and retain the best people for our armed forces.

We consider all pay awards in light of wider pressures on public spending. Public sector pay needs to be fair both for public sector workers and the taxpayer. Around a quarter of all public spending is spent on pay and we need to ensure that our public services remain affordable for the future.

It is also vital that our world class public services continue modernising to meet rising demand for the incredible services they provide, which improve our lives and keep us safe.

[HCWS1770]

Combat Air Strategy

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): The Combat Air Strategy was launched a year ago on the opening day of the Farnborough Airshow, at the birthplace of aviation. It re-affirmed the Government's commitment to the combat air sector, laying out a clear vision for our nation to remain at the leading edge of this sector and providing a clear roadmap to achieve this.

On publication of the strategy, my right hon. Friend, the then Secretary of State for Defence, made a commitment to update the House annually on implementation of the strategy and the programmes it launched. Today I provide this update.

It is worth reflecting on the strategy and its key themes. First, it recognised the strength of our industry and its contribution to the wellbeing of our nation. This sector is economically, strategically important and it enables sovereign decision-making on where and how to deploy our military capability. Secondly, it makes clear that partnering with like-minded allies is the best means to deliver our collective objectives. The update will therefore cover both themes—domestic developments, as well as international.

Domestic update

Alongside the launch of the strategy, the Department re-affirmed our commitment to the approximately £2 billion Future Combat Air System Technology Initiative (FCAS TI). This initiative will mature the technologies needed for our future combat air systems and crucially, develop key skills across both Government and industry. The central pillar of FCAS TI is Team Tempest, a co-funded partnership between Government and our industry partners. Over the last year this partnership has driven a step change in relationships and behaviours between Government and industry by aligning incentives, sharing costs and benefits and creating common interest in pace and agility. The team is on track to delivering 17 European firsts and seven world firsts. The first of these has already been achieved—the embedding of an electrical starter generator by Rolls-Royce within the main body of a powerful military aircraft engine. This increases the power density and reduces the complexity of future aircraft engines, resulting in more efficient engine designs and is fully exploitable to Rolls-Royce's multi-billion pound civil business. This technology will continue to be matured in the coming years, leading to a fully integrated novel power and propulsion system.

This partnership, and the private and public funding underpinning it, already supports over 1,000 jobs, many of them in high-end design, across the breadth of the country, from BAE Systems in Lancashire, to Rolls-Royce in Bristol and to Leonardo in Edinburgh and Luton. This number is set to rise to 1,800 by the end of this year.

The strategy recognised that there is significant capability residing in UK companies of all sizes and therefore, we are engaging with companies beyond our Team Tempest partners. The Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend, the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), hosted an Industry Engagement Day on the 19 March at Farnborough where 180 companies representing a wide range of capabilities and sizes, received briefs on the technologies being matured by Team Tempest and the opportunities that exist for further collaboration. I am pleased to announce that the Team Tempest partners have subsequently engaged an additional 500 companies and so far, have let over 120 sub-contracts in support of Team Tempest activities.

The combat air sector is likely to be a key driver in new technologies and skills in areas such as automation, machine learning, advanced manufacturing and big data which will have broader benefit to the economy. Crucial to the long-term sustainability of this sector is ensuring that the skills needed in the future are identified, the workforce trained and that ultimately these skills

are transferred to the next generation. Team Tempest has therefore established a dedicated STEM engagement team to inspire young people to be involved in this sector. This approach, along with the assurance provided by the strategy has resulted in record numbers of young people joining the workforce. This year, Leonardo MW will recruit 104 graduates and 62 apprentices, with the majority planned to be involved in Team Tempest activities. Similarly, BAE Systems is planning to recruit approximately 700 apprentices and 300 graduates to grow the percentage (currently 10%) of their Team Tempest workforce that are graduates and apprentices.

Working closely with officials from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), the Department has launched a skills index to monitor the health of industrial and Government skills critical to the delivery of our national objectives. Industry have provided their inputs and we are analysing the results and intend to present our findings in September. The skills index will be used to inform and measure the success of interventions such as FCAS TI, to ensure the health of the sector.

International update

On F-35, in February, the avionic and aircraft component repair hub in North Wales was awarded a second major assignment of work worth some £500 million by the US Government. This will create hundreds of additional jobs in the UK and was the result of working closely with industry to deliver a national campaign approach.

On Typhoon, the strategy confirmed our commitment to continue to invest in this remarkable platform. In June, NETMA, on behalf of the UK and the other European partner nations, awarded a €54 million contract for the Typhoon long-term evolution study to industry which will explore how to maximise Typhoon's capability for this decade and beyond.

The FCAS TI programme is maturing technologies for national usage, as well with our international partners. We are contracting our industry to work with their French counterparts on technologies that would maximise interoperability of our current and future platforms, recognising that, as currently envisioned, the Franco-German *Système de Combat Aérien Futur* (SCAF) acquisition programme does not meet the objectives laid out in our strategy. We are also investing in the development of the next generation lift fan for the F-35B, to reduce weight and improve the overall effectiveness of this world beating platform.

Our next generation acquisition programme will define and deliver the capabilities required when the backbone of the RAF, the Typhoon, leaves service. The team delivering this is working at pace, having within a few months of forming, delivered the strategic outline (business) case, which confirmed acquisition options to deliver our future combat air capability, which are now being explored and tested with potential international partners.

Despite challenging international dynamics, the Department has made great strides in our discussions with potential partners. With the support of wider Government (most notably officials from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Trade) and our industry, we have launched feasibility studies with potential partners.

We have discovered that there is a great appetite to collaborate with us. We offer a unique partnering approach, recognising the need to deliver ours and our partners'

benefits together, learning from our rich history of collaboration. This approach provides the firm leadership needed and appears to be an attractive alternative to the traditional, dominant-junior partner relationships.

Last week I signed a memorandum of understanding with my Swedish counterpart on this topic. This marks a significant step in aligning our nations, recognising both nations have highly capable combat air sectors. We will work together to mutually develop our understanding of the systems required to deliver our future requirements and how best to develop, deliver and ultimately support them. Beyond Sweden, we are furthering our engagement with other potential partners and I aim to sign similar arrangements over the next year.

From progress to date, we believe that Europe can afford two separate Combat Air programmes. We are investing in technologies, such as open systems architectures and advanced design and manufacturing techniques which offer significant reductions to the time and cost of design, manufacture, in-service upgrades and modifications. We are also ensuring that collaboration will be with partners whose strategic objectives align with our own, including the determination to reduce costs. We recognise that in an effective and efficient collaboration, there will be an optimum number of partners, which may include those outside of Europe.

The strategy's next major steps are to continue the concept phase until December 2020, gathering evidence on the acquisition options presented and then submit the outline business case. This will select the preferred acquisition route and concept to be taken forward into the assessment phase.

[HCWS1778]

Support for Armed Forces Personnel and Veterans

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt):

Our armed forces do an incredible job to protect us and our nation. They endure great hardships and separation from their loved ones, and they place themselves in harm's way and bear the physical and mental scars of traumatic experiences. They are prepared to risk their lives for us. We owe them a huge debt, and we also owe them justice and fairness.

The Government are clear that the armed forces are not above the law. It is right that whenever the armed forces embark on operations outside of the UK our people and their chain of command are bound to abide by the criminal law of England and Wales, as well as international humanitarian law as set out in the Geneva Conventions. Our service men and women are required to conform to the highest standards of personal behaviour and conduct. And when they fall short they must be held to account. Justice must be served.

The Government believe that, other than in exceptional circumstances, the conclusion of investigations into allegations made against members of the armed forces should draw a line—addressing the uncertainty faced by armed forces personnel concerned about the prospect of reinvestigation and prosecution many years after the event. But the law as it stands cannot allow that line to be drawn with any confidence. That is why the Government believe change is needed to afford armed forces personnel and veterans greater protection from the threat of

prosecution for alleged historical offences committed in the course of duty outside the UK. Armed forces personnel and veterans should not be left with the threat of prosecution hanging over their heads for years to come, in circumstances where their actions have been investigated at the time.

Similar issues arise in relation to civil litigation. Military operations in Iraq resulted in litigation against the Ministry of Defence on an industrial scale: nearly 1,000 claims seeking compensation for personal injury or death (most of which also sought compensation for human rights violations), and approximately 1,400 judicial review claims seeking European Convention on Human Rights-compliant investigation and compensation. Although the law does provide for a time limit in such cases, the courts are currently given broad discretion as to whether to enforce that limit. The effect is that claims have routinely been brought late, with huge numbers of compensation claims permitted to proceed long after the relevant time limit.

The later a claim is brought, especially in respect of allegations emanating from a war zone, the harder it is to assess in a fair and proportionate manner. Records may no longer be sufficiently detailed to be able to prove or disprove specific allegations, and the memories of those involved in incidents fade over time. In such circumstances, the Government may have to choose between settling claims—the merits of which have not been established—or putting armed forces personnel and veterans through the ordeal of giving evidence on the Ministry of Defence's behalf. This is unfair to our personnel and to the taxpayer, who must pay the associated legal costs.

All of this goes to the heart of what is known as “lawfare”—the judicialisation of war. And the risks and impacts of lawfare are clear: in terms of the financial costs; the stress and strain placed on veterans; the potential impact on the morale of serving personnel and our ability to recruit future armed forces personnel; and the risk that decisions taken on operations may be corrupted in order to avoid the possibility of legal proceedings many years in the future—the “chilling effect” feared by military commanders.

This is why I announced on 21 May (HCWS 1575) my plans to take forward work to address this important and concerning issue. I am pleased to be able to announce today the launch of a public consultation on legal protections measures for the armed forces and veterans.

The consultation document contains proposed measures which we believe can be enacted in a manner which is consistent with our obligations under domestic and international law, while providing genuine benefits to our personnel:

First, a proposal to legislate for a presumption against prosecution of current or former armed forces personnel for alleged offences committed in the course of duty outside the UK more than 10 years ago. This measure would in effect raise the threshold to be applied by prosecutors when considering whether a prosecution is genuinely in the public interest in such cases. Two different options are set out in the consultation document for how this measure could be enacted.

And secondly, a proposal to ensure that going forward, the law reflects the unique pressures faced by armed forces personnel while deployed on operations outside the UK, through the creation of a new partial defence to murder. This would be available to current and former armed forces personnel who caused a death in the course of duty outside

the UK through using more force than strictly necessary for the purposes of self-defence, providing that the initial decision to use force was justified. If convicted, the defence would reduce a conviction for murder to manslaughter.

As part of the consultation, we are also seeking views on a proposal to restrict the courts' discretion to extend the normal time limit for bringing civil claims for personal injury and or death in relation to historical events outside of the UK.

We hope that the proposals set out in the consultation will help ensure that our armed forces receive the justice and fairness that they are owed. And, through the consultation, we hope to test and refine what is proposed with the aim of bringing forward legislation as soon as possible.

[HCWS1784]

UN Mission: Sahel Region

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): Reflecting our continued commitment to multilateralism and international peace and security, the UK continues to support increased engagement in the Sahel under the Government's new strategic approach to Africa.

We have committed to reinforcing our support for countries on the front line of instability, including stepping up to the UK's role in tackling the underlying causes of poverty and conflict in Mali and the wider Sahel region (Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso and Mauritania).

I therefore wish to announce to the House the intention to expand the UK's contribution to the United Nations multidimensional integrated stabilisation mission in Mali (MINUSMA) by deploying a long-range reconnaissance task group of 250 personnel in 2020. The UK will support the mission in implementing its mandated tasks—to support the implementation of the peace agreement, promote stability in central Mali and to protect civilians, including supporting the rights of women and children.

The UK's intent is to provide the UN with high-quality forces to missions where their capabilities are most in demand. The UK contribution will provide improved situational awareness and information provision that will help the mission—military and civilian—in support of the mandate, to progress towards a long-term and sustainable peace in Mali. This will signal a significant shift in the UK's approach to peacekeeping as we bridge the gap between those who pay and those who deliver by providing a highly employable, highly capable task force.

This announcement is a significant uplift from the two military staff officers the UK currently contributes to MINUSMA HQ, and the funding of a civilian role to support the UN's work on Sahel issues. It also demonstrates a continued commitment to UN peacekeeping following the completion of our commitment in 2020 to the UN mission in South Sudan.

The UK is committed to supporting the international community in combating instability in Mali, as well as strengthening our wider military engagement across the Sahel region, and is proud to do so under the auspices of the United Nations.

[HCWS1779]

EDUCATION

Teachers' Pay and Conditions

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): The school teachers' review body (STRB) has recommended a 2.75% uplift to the minima and maxima of all pay ranges and allowances in the national pay framework, which is due to be implemented in autumn 2019.

Last year, the Government announced the largest pay rise in nearly a decade for almost a million public sector workers. Building on this, this year I have decided to accept in full the STRB's recommendations for a 2.75% uplift to the minima and maxima of all pay ranges and allowances.

The pay award will both raise starting salaries and increase the competitiveness of the pay framework. As a result, minimum starting salaries for classroom teachers will see an increase between £652 (Rest of England) and £816 (Inner London), and classroom teachers at the top of the main pay range could see an increase between £963 and £1,110. For more experienced classroom teachers at the top of the upper pay range, it could mean an increase of between £1,084 and £1,327.

As a result, the pay ranges for all teachers and leaders will see an uplift. Thanks to the flexible performance-based pay system we have, schools can choose to give teachers and leaders a higher pay rise where this is appropriate to their local context and budget.

As this award is more than the 2% we assessed was affordable in our evidence to the STRB, I will invest a further £105 million in the existing teachers' pay grant this financial year. This is on top of the £321 million funding that schools are already receiving through the teachers' pay grant in 2019-20.

Last year, we specifically targeted early career pay because of the growing retention challenges within the first five years of a teacher's career. The STRB has recognised the improvements we have made to the unqualified and main pay ranges following the 2% uplift to the main pay range in 2017 and 3.5% uplift to both in 2018.

It is now vitally important to increase the competitiveness of the pay framework and help address the teacher supply challenges across the workforce. This year's pay award will also support the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy, which I published in January this year. The strategy underpins the early career framework, which provides a fully funded two-year package of support for all early career teachers.

In addition to their pay, teachers continue to benefit from defined benefit pensions, which are amongst the most generous available.

Thanks to the Government's balanced approach to public finances, getting debt to fall as a share of our economy, while investing in our vital services and keeping taxes low, we are able to continue our flexible approach to pay policy, allowing us to attract and retain the best people for our schools.

We consider all pay awards in light of wider pressures on public spending. Public sector pay needs to be fair both for public sector workers and the taxpayer. Around

a quarter of all public spending is spent on pay and we need to ensure that our public services remain affordable for the future.

It is also vital that our world-class public services continue to modernise to meet rising demand for the incredible services they provide, which improve our lives and keep us safe.

I am grateful for the in-depth considerations the STRB has given in concluding their report and recommendations for the 2019 teachers' pay award.

I will deposit in the Libraries of both Houses a full list of the recommendations and my proposed approach for all pay and allowance ranges.

My officials will write to all of the statutory consultees involved in the STRB's 29th remit and invite them to contribute to a consultation on my response to these recommendations and on a revised school teachers' pay and conditions document and pay order. The consultation will last for eight weeks.

[HCWS1766]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council 15 July 2019

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I attended the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 15 July. It was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Brussels.

Current affairs

The High Representative and Foreign Ministers discussed the most pressing issues on the international agenda. This included Turkey's current drilling activities in the eastern Mediterranean.

Foreign Ministers also discussed the recent developments in Sudan. Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto reported on his visit to the region on behalf of the EU. Ministers noted that the agreement reached between the Transitional Military Council and Forces for Freedom and Change on 11 July was an important breakthrough, and underlined the importance of supporting the civilian transition, including through additional financial support.

Ministers also touched on Venezuela, following the visit of special adviser Enrique Iglesias to Caracas on 7-10 July. They reiterated the EU's support for a political solution through the Oslo process, while underlining strong concerns over the human rights situation following the report by the office of the high commissioner for human rights, Michelle Bachelet.

The High Representative also covered the EU-Ukraine summit, the fifth anniversary of the downing of MH17, her recent visit to the Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) and the outcome of the fifth EU-G5 Sahel Ministerial meeting in Ouagadougou (9 July).

I briefed the Council on my recent engagement on Iran. The Council discussed the tense situation in the Gulf region and recent announcements and steps by Tehran to reduce its implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Ministers referred

to ways of reducing the ongoing risk of military escalation and reiterated the EU's regret at the decision by the US to re-impose sanctions on Iran.

Ministers also took stock of ongoing EU efforts to enable the continuation of legitimate trade with Iran, including through the special purpose vehicle "INSTEX" which is now operational. They also urged Iran to reverse the steps taken and reaffirmed that the EU's commitment to the nuclear deal depended on full compliance by Iran.

The High Representative spoke to Ministers about her visit to Baghdad on 13-14 July. Foreign Ministers took stock of developments in Iraq and discussed how the EU could provide further support.

Central African Republic

Ministers reflected on how the EU could strengthen its support to encourage further implementation of the peace agreement signed in Bangui on 6 February 2019. They agreed to start working on plans for a possible civilian Common Security and Defence Policy mission.

External aspects of migration

Ministers agreed that efforts to address migration should be stepped up. They noted that greater financial resources were needed, especially for the EU trust fund for Africa. Ministers also discussed the importance of accelerating resettlement of persons needing international protection and making progress on the disembarkation of migrants rescued at sea.

Lunch with the Minister of Foreign Affairs for Moldova Nicolae Popescu

Foreign Ministers conveyed their support, as well as their expectations, on the implementation of reforms related to the association agreement, and their willingness to resume conditional EU financial support.

Council conclusions

The Council agreed a number of measures:

The Council adopted conclusions on Iraq.

The Council adopted conclusions on Turkish drilling activities in the eastern Mediterranean.

The Council adopted conclusions on the EU's priorities at the 74th UN general assembly.

A decision was adopted by the Council on sanctions against North Korea following the annual review.

The Council authorised the opening of negotiations on a joint political declaration of the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States and the European Union on the 2030 agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) implementation.

The Council adopted the EU's position in view of the second EU-Cuba joint council that will take place on 9 September in Havana.

The Council approved the update of the military requirements for military mobility within and beyond the EU.

The Council approved the adoption of an ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) statement on aviation partnership.

The Council approved the adoption of an ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) statement on "Promoting women, peace and security at the ASEAN Regional Forum".

The Council transposed an amendment adopted by the UN concerning one person listed under the South Sudan sanctions framework.

The Council adopted the position to be taken on behalf of the EU in the Joint Committee established by the framework agreement on partnership and co-operation between the EU and the Philippines.

The Council adopted the position to be taken by the EU in the Cote d'Ivoire-EU EPA Committee regarding adoption of protocol 1 concerning the definition of the concept of "originating products" and methods for administrative cooperation (rules of origin).

The Council endorsed the text of six working papers and one information paper to be submitted by Finland on behalf of the European Union and its member states to the 40th assembly of the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO).

The Council adopted a decision authorising the Commission to enter into negotiations on the modernisation of the Charter Treaty (10738/19). The Council also adopted negotiating directives (10745/19 ADD 1). In parallel, the representatives of the governments of the member states that are parties to the energy charter treaty adopted a decision authorising the Commission to enter into negotiations for the elements falling under the competence of the member states.

[HCWS1773]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Community Pharmacy Contractual Framework

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): I am delighted to be able to announce a land mark five-year settlement for the Community Pharmacy Contractual Framework. This deal will transform the role of community pharmacy and embed them as the first port of call for minor illness and health advice in England.

Every day, in England there are around 1.6 million visits to community pharmacies. No appointment is necessary, and a person does not need to be registered with a pharmacy to benefit from their support or advice. The potential for community pharmacies to play a greater role across a wide range of health priorities is evident.

Over the last few months we have worked with the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee (PSNC) to develop a future vision for community pharmacy and expand their role across three key areas: prevention, urgent care and medicines safety.

We have agreed a settlement that will now translate this vision into practice and begin to transform the role of community pharmacy. It will see community pharmacies better utilised and integrated within the primary medical and community services we are working to deliver.

This agreement will come into effect from October 2019 and will mark the start of a series of developments that will continue over the course of the settlement period, through to 2024.

We will continue to work with the PSNC, and NHS England and improvement to further deliver this programme of work in partnership.

[HCWS1777]

NHS Pay Review Body 32nd Report: Government Response

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I am responding on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to the 32nd report of the NHS Pay review Body (NHSPRB). The report has been laid before Parliament today (Cm 147). Copies of the report are available to hon. Members from the Vote Office and to noble Lords from the Printed Paper Office.

This is the second year of the three-year Agenda for Change pay and contract reform deal (2018/19 to 2020/21); the NHSPRB was asked therefore not to make any pay recommendations for 2019/20.

The Government welcome the 32nd report of the NHSPRB and are grateful to the Chair and Members for all their work and helpful observations, on effective workforce planning and how best to support the development of the NHS workforce.

We are pleased that their observations broadly reflect the themes published in the Interim People Plan and will help inform the upcoming final People Plan.

[HCWS1764]

47th Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration Report: Government Response

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I am responding on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to the 47th report of the Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration (DDRB). The report has been laid before Parliament today (Cm148) and a copy can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-07-22/HCWS1765/>. I am grateful to the Chair and members of the DDRB for their report.

The Government are today announcing pay rises for doctors and dentists working across the NHS.

Building on our ambition to make the NHS the best place to work, as set out in the NHS interim people plan, this is a pay rise that recognises the hard work and dedication of doctors and dentists and puts forward an approach for a potential multi-year deal with contract reform for specialty and associate specialist (SAS) doctors to enhance recruitment, retention, morale and productivity for this group.

We have recently agreed multi-year deals for both non-medical Agenda for Change staff and doctors and dentists in training and this is part of our approach to make the NHS the best employer in the world while supporting the NHS workforce to deliver excellent patient care.

Thanks to the Government's balanced approach to public finances—getting debt falling as a share of our economy, while investing in our vital services and keeping taxes low—we are able to continue our flexible approach to pay policy, allowing us to attract and retain the best people for our hospitals.

We consider all pay awards in light of wider pressures on public spending. Public sector pay needs to be fair both for public sector workers and the taxpayer. Around a quarter of all public spending is spent on pay and we need to ensure that our public services remain affordable for the future.

It is also vital that our world-class public services continue modernising to meet rising demand for the incredible services they provide, which improve our lives and keep us safe.

This pay rise represents one of the biggest uplifts in pay for medical staff for over a decade. In addition to their pay, medical staff continue to benefit from defined-benefit pensions, which are among the most generous available.

Today's pay award is worth:

Between £1,940 and £2,630 for consultants

Between £970 and £1,820 for specialty doctors

Between £1,360 and £2,250 for associate specialists

The DDRB were asked not to make a pay recommendation for general medical practitioners as this is the first year of the recently announced five-year contract deal. As part of this agreement, core general practice funding will increase by £978 million per year by 2023-24 providing greater certainty for GMPs to plan ahead.

The Government's response to the DDRB recommendations takes account of affordability in the context of the NHS long-term plan and the 2019 spending review. Given the NHS budget is now set for the next five years, there is a direct trade-off between pay and staff numbers and our response takes account of this trade-off.

The Government's response is as follows:

Consultants

A 2.5% general uplift in pay backdated to April 2019.

The value of both national and old style local clinical excellence awards (CEAs) to be frozen.

Specialty Doctors (New Grade 2008) and Associate Specialist (Closed Grade) (SAS Doctors)

The Government take note of the DDRB's comments on the particular issues of morale and motivation in relation to this group that led to their pay recommendation. We agree that investment in raising the profile and attractiveness of SAS doctor roles is important and we are committing to negotiations on a multi-year pay agreement, incorporating contract reform for SAS doctors. SAS doctors will receive:

A 2.5% general uplift in pay backdated to April 2019.

The potential for an additional 1% on top of the 2.5% already paid to be added to pay in 2020-21 conditional on contract reform, through a multi-year agreement.

Doctors and Dentists in Training

On 27 June the Government announced that junior doctors had overwhelmingly backed a four-year deal incorporating pay increases and improved flexibility and working conditions. This brings to an end the junior doctors dispute and the British Medical Association (BMA) and NHS employers have now collectively agreed the amended junior doctor contract.

The four-year deal guarantees pay increases of 2% per annum for the next four years and there will in addition be around £90 million of investment into the contract including a new pay point for the most senior doctors in training, an allowance for those working less than full time to support flexible working and increased pay for those working the most weekends or whose shifts end in the early hours of the morning. Taken alongside an 8.2% four-year pay rise, this will give junior doctors and current medical students the support they fully deserve.

General Dental Practitioners

A 2.5% general uplift in the pay element of their contract backdated to April 2019.

General Medical Practitioner Trainees and Appraisers

A 2.5% increase in full to the value of the GMP trainees grant and the GMP appraisers' grant.

[HCWS1765]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs: Reappointment

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): I am pleased to announce that Dr Owen Bowden-Jones has been reappointed to the ACMD both as a member and as its Chair. This re-appointment is for a three-year term, beginning on 1 January 2020. Dr Bowden-Jones is an experienced clinician who provides assessment and treatment for people experiencing harms from emerging problem drugs.

The ACMD was established under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and provides advice to Government on issues related to the harms of drugs. It also has a statutory role under the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016.

[HCWS1781]

Police Remuneration Review Body 2019: Government Response

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The fifth annual report of the Police Remuneration Review Body was published today. In line with our letter setting the body's remit it has made recommendations on pay and allowances for police officers at all ranks in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Government have considered the recommendations of the report insofar as they relate to police officers in England and Wales, which the Home Office is responsible for. We wish to express thanks to the Chair and members of the review body for their work on the report and pay recommendations.

Last year, the Government announced the largest pay rise in nearly a decade for almost a million public sector workers. Building on this, this year the Government have accepted in full the recommendations of the PRRB that a consolidated increase of 2.5% should be awarded to all ranks at all pay points. It has also accepted a corresponding increase to London Weighting and the Dog Handlers' Allowance and an increase in the on-call allowance for officers in the federated ranks from £15 to £20 for each 24-hour period on-call. These will be implemented with effect from 1 September 2019.

We asked the PRRB to review the National Police Chiefs' Council's proposals for progression pay for police apprentices. The PRRB recommended that subject to further review in the next pay round, no change is made to the current arrangements for apprentice progression. The Government have accepted this recommendation.

Thanks to the Government's balanced approach to public finances—getting debt falling as a share of our economy, while investing in our vital services and keeping taxes low—we are able to continue our flexible approach to pay policy, allowing us to attract and retain the best people for our police forces.

We consider all pay awards in light of wider pressures on public spending. Public sector pay needs to be fair both for public sector workers and the taxpayer. Around a quarter of all public spending is spent on pay and we

need to ensure that our public services remain affordable for the future. In addition to their pay, police officers continue to benefit from defined benefit pensions, which are among the most generous available.

It is also vital that our world class public services continue modernising to meet rising demand for the incredible services they provide, which improve our lives and keep us safe.

The Police Remuneration Review Body Report (CP 139) has been laid before Parliament and copies are available in the Vote Office and at www.gov.uk.

[HCWS1769]

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures: 1 March to 31 May 2019

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of his TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

TPIM notices in force (as of 31 May 2019)	3
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens (as of 31 May 2019)	3
TPIM notices extended (during the reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revoked (during the reporting period)	1
TPIM notices revived (during the reporting period)	0
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices (during the reporting period)	4
Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused (during the reporting period)	0
The number of current subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (as of 28 February 2019)	1

The TPIM review group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. The second quarter TRG meetings took place on 4 and 13 June 2019.

On 15 March 2019 an individual was convicted for seven breaches of his TPIM notice and was sentenced to 16 months' imprisonment.

On 22 March 2019 the trial of an individual charged with breaching his TPIM notice was discontinued as the jury could not reach a majority verdict. The CPS elected not to seek a retrial as it was assessed not to be in the public interest.

On 13 May 2019 an individual was sentenced for one breach of his TPIM notice. He was sentenced to two years' imprisonment (suspended for two years), a 12-hour curfew to be observed for 12 months, 150 hours' unpaid work, 18 months' attendance at an extremist risk guidance and identity help programme and a victim surcharge and collection order.

[HCWS1780]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Strengthening Communities

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): On Saturday 20 July I published “By deeds and their results: How we will strengthen our communities and nation”.

The document sets out the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government’s vision for stronger communities, explaining why communities matter, what strong communities look like, and what Government and partners can do to support their creation.

It also signals the intention that the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government work with other Government Departments to champion the importance of communities in every aspect of society, and focus its future work on building stronger communities across the country.

When communities are strong, society is strong. Communities can improve health and wellbeing, enable economic prosperity, help improve the local environment, and provide support in times of crisis. But eight years on from the Localism Act—the last piece of legislation focused on supporting communities—the challenges facing communities have evolved, and the time is right to assess and change the way in which Government can support communities. This is particularly necessary given the long-term divisions which have been exposed following the vote on the UK’s future membership of the European Union.

“By deeds and their results” commits the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government to several actions, including:

Holding a national conversation with communities across England about their view of who we are as a nation, their vision for the future of their community and our country, and what local and national Government can and should be doing to support their community to thrive. We want Government and all public bodies to renew their understanding of their role in building stronger communities—this should be informed by direct conversations with people, in partnership with our existing local democratic institutions. The conversation will commence following the UK’s formal departure from the European Union.

Establishing a series of civic deal pilots to test how Government put into practice the principles in “By deeds and their results”. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will work jointly with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on these pilots. We will work with each pilot to consider how Government activities can be better aligned and co-ordinated to support communities in identifying and delivering their own priorities.

Publishing a communities White Paper to renew Government’s focus on building stronger communities across England. This will consider, for example, how community rights are strengthened, promoted and made easier to take up; how funding for communities can be more simplified, integrated and less risk averse; and how communities can best shape local services and decision-making more broadly. The final scope of the White Paper will be developed in partnership with communities, including through the national conversation and civic deal pilots.

“By deeds and their results” is underpinned by four pillars that will inform all work to strengthen communities across our Department:

1. Trust, connectedness and local pride;
2. Active citizenship and local control;

3. Shared community spaces;

4. Shared prosperity, with no community left behind.

This publication represents the next step in an ongoing conversation with communities that will shape the Department’s future activity. By working in partnership with all stakeholders—including other Government Departments, councils, businesses, faith groups and civil society organisations—we can create an environment that supports and enables stronger communities to flourish.

[HCWS1786]

Rented Housing and Park Home Consultation

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The housing landscape has fundamentally changed since the introduction of the Housing Act 1988—an Act that covers both the social and the private rented sector, as well as providing the tenure framework for a number of other landlords. With one in five households now in the private rented sector, with more families with children and older people renting their homes, it is time for a generational change to renting which better meets the needs of this important market.

Yesterday therefore, my Department launched a number of consultations, which will take forward this Government’s commitment to protect tenants, support landlords, drive up standards in the rental sector and make the housing market fairer for everyone.

Cracking down on rogue landlords

The Government are determined that those renting their homes are not forced into inadequate or unsafe housing. The majority of landlords and property agents in the private rented sector provide decent and well-managed accommodation, but there is a small number who knowingly flout their legal obligations and rent out substandard accommodation. These few criminals account for a disproportionate amount of the 25% of private rented homes which are non-decent.

The Prime Minister committed to widen access to information on the database of rogue landlords and property agents to tenants. In its current form, the database is viewable only to local authorities. It is targeted at the most serious and prolific criminals, those who have been convicted of specified banning order offences such as failure to make a property habitable when instructed by the local authority, through to serious crimes such as specified drug and sexual offences.

Our consultation, “Rogue Landlord Database Reform: Widening Access and Considering the Scope of the Database of Rogue Landlords and Property Agents”, seeks views on how to open-up the database so tenants can know more about the landlord who they plan to, from or already rent from. We also want to consider the scope of the database, this consultation therefore also seeks views on whether the database should cover a wider range of relevant criminal, civil and housing regulation breaches to help further raise standards across the sector.

Abolishing section 21 “no-fault” evictions and supporting landlords to reclaim their property

On 15 April, I announced plans to abolish section 21 of the Housing Act 1988, putting an end to so-called “no fault” evictions and giving tenants the certainty that they will not be asked to leave their home without a valid reason.

The Government want to deliver a balanced and effective tenancy regime that is fair to both landlords and tenants and yesterday published “A New Deal for Renting: resetting the balance of rights and responsibilities between landlords and tenants”. This consultation seeks views on how tenancies should operate in future. It is the first step in a journey that will deliver on our commitment to bring greater fairness and transparency to tenants and ensure they have the security they need to plan for the future.

The consultation also proposes three new grounds and asks for views on the current grounds for eviction and how they can be improved. Landlords should have confidence that they will be able to regain possession of their property if they need to, and the consultation further explores whether the courts could use the accelerated procedure for dealing with possession order applications under some or all of the mandatory grounds in section 8 of the Housing Act 1988.

Taken together, the reforms proposed across these two consultations will build on Government action to drive up standards across the sector, deliver the rental sector the country deserves and needs, and create a housing market that works for everyone.

Protecting residents of park homes

Finally, we have also published a consultation seeking views on how the fit and proper person test for park homes sites will work in practice. In the Government response to the review of park homes legislation, we committed to introducing the test subject to a technical consultation to ensure the effective operation of the test. When implemented, the test will strengthen local authorities’ powers to target the worst offenders and remove unscrupulous and criminal site operators from the park homes sector.

I am making a copy of all consultations available in the Library of the House

[HCWS1787]

New Unitary Councils

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): In my written statement of 1 November 2018 [HCWS1058] to the House, I committed to set out in due course the specific circumstances in which I would be prepared to issue a formal invitation to councils under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, to submit proposals for the establishment of new unitary councils.

Today I am confirming the circumstances in which I would be prepared to issue such an invitation; how I intend to assess any unitary proposals councils make in response; and our continued approach to any proposals two or more district councils may make to merge in order to form a new larger district council.

Locally-led changes to the structure of local government, whether in the form of unitarisation or district mergers, can—with local support—be an appropriate means of ensuring more sustainable local government and local service delivery, enhanced local accountability, and empowered local communities. This statement today continues the Government’s commitment to supporting those councils that wish to combine, to serve their communities better and will consider unitarisation and mergers between councils when locally requested.

However, I recognise that unitarisation may not be appropriate everywhere. I also recognise that it is essential that any local government restructuring should be on the basis of locally led proposals and should not involve top-down Whitehall solutions being imposed on areas. The Government do not support top-down unitary restructuring. This has been the Government’s consistent approach since 2010.

Today, I want to provide further clarity for those councils who might consider the possibility of restructuring, by setting out the factors councils should consider and the processes to be followed—including with regard to local support.

For councils wishing to restructure to form unitary local government, the first step of the statutory process as set out under the 2007 Act is for me to issue an invitation to councils to submit proposals. There are two circumstances in which I will consider issuing such an invitation.

The first circumstance is where the following two conditions are met:

There is a local request for an invitation.

That I consider that the request demonstrates local opinion is coalescing around a single option which is reasonably likely to meet the existing publicly announced criteria for unitarisation.

In forming my view I would carefully consider the request, including the groups making and supporting it and their reasons for so doing. Where I issue an invitation, I would do so to all those councils that I consider to have regard to the area concerned, whether or not they were among those who had made the original request.

The second circumstance is where I consider that doing so would be appropriate given the specific circumstances of the area, including in relation to the long-term sustainability of local services. This is the situation in which my predecessor, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), issued an invitation to the councils in Northamptonshire.

Following such an invitation, it would be for the councils concerned to decide whether to develop and submit proposals for unitarisation, either individually or jointly by two or more councils.

I confirm that I will assess any locally-led unitary proposal that I receive against the criteria for unitarisation which we announced to Parliament in 2017 and which I and my predecessor have consistently used since then. These criteria state that subject to Parliamentary approval a proposal can be implemented, with or without modification, if I conclude that across the area as a whole the proposal is likely to:

improve the area’s local government;

command a good deal of local support across the area; and
cover an area that provides a credible geography for the proposed new structures, including that any new unitary council’s population would be expected to be in excess of 300,000.

On district council mergers, I confirm that where two or more district councils submit a proposal to merge, I will assess this against the criteria for mergers which we announced to Parliament in November 2017 and which we have used since then. The statutory process for such mergers does not involve my inviting proposals, and I recognise that particularly small district councils may

wish to propose merging as a natural next step following a number of years of successful joint working, sharing of services and senior management teams.

The criteria for district council mergers are that, subject to Parliamentary approval, a proposal to merge would be implemented if I had reached a judgment in the round that if so implemented it would be likely to:

improve the area's local government;

command local support, in particular that the merger is proposed by all councils which are to be merged and there is evidence of a good deal of local support; and

the area is a credible geography, consisting of two or more existing local government areas that are adjacent, and which, if established, would not pose an obstacle to locally-led proposals for authorities to combine to serve their communities better and would facilitate joint working between local authorities.

This statement is intended to provide clarity to councils and communities and help ensure that time and effort are not wasted on pursuing proposals which are unlikely to get the go ahead. It is important that those seeking to pursue locally led proposals are confident that there is a broad basis of common local support for the proposals to avoid unnecessary local conflict and distraction from the delivery of quality public services. The statement underlines the need for any proposals to be innovative, improve services, enhance accountability, have local support and deliver financial sustainability if they are to be taken forward.

Moreover, restructuring is only one of the different ways that councils can move forward. Joint working with other councils and partners could also be an appropriate and sustainable way forward. Such joint working can take a variety of forms ranging from adopting joint plans, setting up joint committees, and sharing back office services, to establishing combined authorities, and may extend across county boundaries. Those in an area will know what is best—the very essence of localism to which the Government remain committed.

[HCWS1790]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Consultation on UK Export Finance's Foreign Content Policy: Response

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Government will today publish the response to the consultation on UK Export Finance's (UKEF) Foreign Content policy. It sets out the approach UKEF will take to determine the level of non-UK goods, services and intangible assets in transaction supported by UKEF.

The purpose of the new approach is to ensure that UKEF's support is flexible and meets the needs of UK exporters to help them win business overseas, fulfilling UKEF's mission to ensure that no viable UK export fails for lack of finance or insurance from the private sector, while operating at no net cost to the taxpayer.

The consultation, published in April 2019, was part of UKEF's commitment in the Government's export strategy to review its products and policies to ensure they reflect the full breadth of its capability and the needs of business. The consultation received 28 responses, which were largely supportive of the approach proposed

by Government in the consultation and reinforced the need for its foreign content policy to adapt to increasingly globalised supply chains.

The new policy ensures that UKEF will implement a principles-based approach to foreign content, recognising the full contribution of the UK supply chain. This approach will supplement UKEF's current UK content requirement, making it easier for UKEF to consider support for scenarios which are outside of a specific export contract, but which nevertheless are conducive to supporting and developing UK exports.

This approach will broaden the availability of UKEF support for all sectors including those to which it has not traditionally provided support. To align with this expectation, UKEF will be updating its definitions to clarify UKEF's ability to support intangible assets.

A copy of the consultation response will be placed in the Libraries of both House.

[HCWS1761]

JUSTICE

Enforcement Agents

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): Further to a statement made by the then Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer) [*Official Report*, 26 November 2018; Vol.650, c.2WS], I wanted to update the House on the Ministry of Justice's review of the implementation of the enforcement agent reforms contained in the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act 2007. These reforms, which came into force in 2014, aimed to provide protection to debtors from the aggressive pursuit of their debt from enforcement agents, while balancing this against the need for effective enforcement.

Our review was launched with a call for evidence on 26 November 2018 that ran to 17 February 2019. This sought to provide further information on the operation of the reforms following the Government's publication of the first post-implementation review on 2 April 2018. This review found that the reforms had led to many positive changes, including improved transparency and consistency, both in terms of the enforcement process and the fees charged by enforcement agents. The report noted, however, that some enforcement agents were still perceived to be acting aggressively and not complying with the new rules.

We received nearly 300 responses to the call for evidence from: individuals who have been visited by enforcement agents; enforcement agents, firms and trade associations; local authorities and other creditors; advice organisations and charities; MPs and members of the judiciary.

I am grateful to the Justice Committee for conducting an inquiry into this important issue. We are carefully considering its recommendations for further reform. We will provide a full response to the report and to our call for evidence, following further engagement with stakeholders over the summer.

Based on their data, civil enforcement agents now enforce around 3 million civil cases each year. Creditors need an effective, sustainable way to ensure that they receive the money owed to them. At the same time, the Government must ensure that those in debt, especially the vulnerable, including those with mental health issues, are treated fairly and given the protections they deserve.

Enforcement agents carry out an important job in often very challenging circumstances.

Many firms have made considerable efforts to make sure that they are treating those in debt fairly, but complaints continue. All enforcement agents must operate to the same high standards. So, we will be pushing forward with a reform package to make sure that people do not face aggressive action from enforcement agents and to improve trust in the industry as a whole.

One area of our focus will be how people can make complaints against enforcement agents. Data submitted to our call for evidence has shown that the volume of complaints made about enforcement agents is much lower than would be expected relative to the volume of debts enforced, and compared to similar industries. While this may in part be due to improvements in the sector, we believe that there are a number of barriers in the current complaints system that may deter people from making a complaint. We will look to address these with enforcement agents and others with a view to making the complaints system more effective, transparent and independent.

We are also considering what role independent regulation of enforcement agents could potentially play in ensuring that vulnerable debtors are treated fairly. We believe that regulation of this sector could be strengthened but we do not yet have a firm view on the form this should take. It is an issue that would benefit from further discussions with stakeholders. We are clear that any further regulation must be effective, proportionate and sustainable.

Alongside considering these reforms, we wish to bring quicker changes to the system to improve how enforcement agents operate. Our call for evidence and the Justice Committee's inquiry found strong evidence that body-worn cameras are important in protecting both those in debt and enforcement agents, raising standards in the industry and enabling complaints to be properly investigated. We will be taking forward work to make use of body-worn cameras mandatory for all private enforcement agents and to produce best practice guidance.

Under the current system, all enforcement agents have to demonstrate knowledge of the law, customer care, dealing with conflict situations and identifying vulnerable situations. We believe that there is a good case, however, to look again at the guidance and requirements for how enforcement agents interact with those in debt, with a view to addressing any unfair treatment of vulnerable people, including those with mental health issues.

The Ministry of Justice proposes to engage with the enforcement industry, debt advice agencies, creditors and others on these and other issues over the summer before responding in full to its call for evidence and the Justice Committee report. The response will include a full analysis of the variety of evidence submitted to the review and set out proposals for reform to enhance the regulation of enforcement agents. We will consult on any proposals for legislative reform.

This work forms part of wider cross-Government efforts to improve the treatment of those in debt. This includes work by HM Treasury to implement a "breathing space" and statutory debt repayment plan for people in problem debt and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government review of how local authorities can improve the way they collect council tax debt.

[HCWS1776]

Prison Service Pay Review Body Recommendations 2019-20: Government Response

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): I am today announcing the Government's decision on pay rises for prison staff.

The prison service pay review body has made its recommendations for the 2019-20 pay award and we are accepting these recommendations in full.

Last year, the Government announced the largest pay rise in nearly a decade for almost a million public sector workers. Today we are building on that with a pay award that is worth at least 2.2% for all prison staff and 3% for our Band 3 officers on the "fair and sustainable" terms and conditions. This is the second year in a row we have put in place awards over 2% for our prison staff and this year's settlement represents the highest consolidated increase for over 10 years.

In addition to the headline increases we will also implement the totality of the other review body recommendations. This represents a full package for staff that will support us to recruit and retain prison officers and managers, contributing to safer prisons and reduced reoffending. In addition to their pay, prison officers continue to benefit from defined-benefit pensions, which are amongst the most generous available.

For a Band 3 officer on the modern terms and conditions the pay settlement is worth on average £1,277.

Alongside this investment in pay, prison officers are being trained to be more effective and gain experience in critical areas. The key worker role within the new offender management in custody model is currently being rolled out across prisons. This has been enabled by the investment in additional Band 3 officers, and supports officers at this grade to build more effective relationships with prisoners in order to improve safety and help reduce reoffending.

Thanks to the Government's balanced approach to public finances—getting debt falling as a share of our economy, while investing in our vital services and keeping taxes low—we are able to continue our flexible approach to pay policy, allowing us to attract and retain the best people for our prisons.

We consider all pay awards in light of wider pressures on public spending. Public sector pay needs to be fair both for public sector workers and the taxpayer. Around a quarter of all public spending is spent on pay and we need to ensure that our public services remain affordable for the future.

It is also vital that our world class public services continue modernising to meet rising demand for the incredible services they provide, which improve our lives and keep us safe.

The report has been laid before Parliament today 22 July 2019 and is available online at: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-07-22/HCWS1768/>. I am grateful to the chair and members of the review body for their report.

[HCWS1768]

Response to Opposition Day Debate: Prisons and Probation

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): Today I would like to update the House on prisons and probation following the Opposition day debate of 14 May 2019.

Our prison and probation systems have faced challenges in recent years, with changes in population, changes in the nature of crimes being committed and wider societal changes impacting the criminal justice sector, such as the use of Spice and other psychoactive substances. We need to ensure that our prisons and probation services provide appropriate punishment, and work with offenders to stop the root causes of criminality, supporting them to re-join their communities.

HMP Birmingham was an exceptional case caused by a number of complex factors and the Government had been working closely with G4S to try and resolve the issues in HMP Birmingham. However, it became increasingly clear that G4S alone was not able to make the improvements that were so badly needed. That is why the Government took decisive action to step in and did so at no additional costs to the taxpayer.

However, the Government are clear that the exceptional experience of HMP Birmingham is no more representative of the wider contribution of the private sector to our justice system than individual failings in the public sector are in the public estate. The Government remain committed to ensuring a mixed market for delivery of services in the justice system. Partnering with the private and voluntary sectors offers the taxpayer greater value for money, greater diversity of provision and greater innovation than we would see from the public sector alone. Our policy remains a commitment to what works; we will continue to resist ideological calls to spend taxpayers money in a particular sector, regardless of value proposition.

Government contracts are never awarded lightly: each is awarded following a robust process. The Government have always been compliant with procurement regulations and follows these diligently when assessing supplier's suitability.

Through the competition processes we undertake a rigorous financial and operational assessment of bids put forward by any existing or potential operator to ensure bids are of sufficient quality, value for money and affordability. The Government also ensure, through the procurement and contract management processes, that we have sufficient measures in place to have confidence in the delivery and maintenance of the contracted services over their lifetime.

The chief inspector of prisons has highlighted many examples of excellent performance by private prisons in his inspection reports and competition for custodial services in England and Wales is well established, and has been in place since the early 1990s. Privately managed prison providers achieve the majority of their targets, and their performance is closely monitored by the robust contract management processes HMPPS has in place.

Privately-managed prisons have also pioneered the use of modern technology to improve the running of establishments and help promote rehabilitation—innovations that in many cases are still not widely found in the public estate. This includes the development of in-cell telephony to help prisoners maintain ties with their families; interactive story-time activities between prisoners and their children; and the introduction of electronic kiosks, which allow prisoners to have greater control of managing their day-to-day lives.

Private probation providers have drawn on prior experience delivering employability services to improve the sourcing of unpaid work placements for offenders on community sentences, with nine out of 13 community rehabilitation companies rated “Good” for the delivery of unpaid work by HM Inspectorate of Probation. CRCs have also demonstrated their potential to drive innovation in rehabilitation programmes, with London CRC helping pioneer the safer streets partnership to tackle gangs and knife crime and Kent, Surrey and Sussex CRC developing the first behavioural intervention targeted at stalking offences.

The Government therefore rejects the call to end plans to run competitions for new private prisons. We are also committed to ensuring a mixed market for service delivery in the probation system, with offender management delivered by the National Probation Service, but up to £280 million allocated for contracting of unpaid work and rehabilitative services from the private and voluntary sector. In addition, we plan to ring-fence an initial £20 million per year for a regional outcome and innovation fund to be spent on innovative, cross-cutting approaches. There will inevitably in any large organisation be occasional instances where service delivery is not as expected, regardless of whether the public or private sectors are responsible. In these instances, we ensure prompt action is taken to rectify any identified issues, and to learn lessons. This Government will not shy away from learning lessons where they are required—and will not seek to denigrate the dedicated work of large numbers of those who deliver our public services simply because of who their employer is.

Instead, this Government are committed to ensuring that all our prisons, public or private, are places of safety and reform, and that our probation services maximise their performance in keeping the public safe by helping offenders on community orders or leaving prison to turn their lives around in the community.

[HCWS1783]

PRIME MINISTER

National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: Third Annual Report

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Today, I am pleased to announce the publication of the third annual report of the National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR). This also provides an annual update on the National Security Capability Review (NSCR). I will be placing a copy of the report in the Libraries of both Houses and publishing the report on gov.uk.

In the SDSR, we committed to giving Parliament an annual update on implementation of the strategy. This annual report sets out our progress in delivering on our

SDSR and NSCR commitments and shows how the United Kingdom continues to meet the threats and challenges posed by a changing world, proving the merits of fusion doctrine, as introduced in last year's NSCR.

The NSCR reinforced our vision and values set out in the National Security Strategy and SDSR of a secure and prosperous United Kingdom with global reach and influence. Our overarching national security objectives: protect our people; project our global influence; and promote our prosperity, continue to be the foundation of our national security approach. In support of each of these objectives, we have made significant progress on a cross-Government programme of activity, overseen by a sub-committee of the National Security Council (NSC).

Much has changed since the National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review was published in November 2015 - not least the United Kingdom's historic decision to leave the European Union. Whilst the principal threats to our national security remain the same, we face a challenge from a resurgence of state based threats. These threats are more complex and are testing the norms of the rules-based international system on which we have come to rely for our prosperity and security. Nevertheless, NATO remains the bedrock of the UK's defence and the leading instrument of our national security.

Our outlook remains outward facing and the UK will not shy away from defending democratic principles across the globe whilst ensuring British values are safeguarded at home. We value that outreach, and our partnerships and relationships across the world which are the envy of friend and foe alike. They have proven time and again to be a critical factor in our successes on the global stage.

In the SDSR, we made 89 principal commitments. As at March 2019, we have completed 32, with the rest being progressed. The SDSR pledged to deliver a number of complex major projects and programmes, some with a delivery timescale of a decade or more; progress on these is as we would expect at this stage. The NSCR provided 27 further significant commitments of which 3 have already been completed.

We remain the only country in the G20 to meet both the expenditure targets of 2% of GDP on defence and 0.7% of gross national income on overseas development, driving forward the implementation of the sustainable development goals.

[HCWS1775]

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Supporting Families

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): In the good work plan, the Government announced the largest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation and set out a series of ambitious reforms to ensure the UK leads the world in meeting the challenges of the changing world of work. Building on these reforms, today the Government have launched a consultation on measures to support parents to enter, remain in and return to the workforce. Employees who feel that they are more in control of the balance between home and work commitments are more likely to be engaged at work. Their employers will benefit from greater employee loyalty, commitment and motivation and are likely to be able to draw on a wider pool of talent when recruiting.

The consultation seeks views on:

- high-level options for reforming parental leave and pay, and the costs, benefits and trade-offs of potential reforms;

- a proposal for a new entitlement to neonatal leave and pay for parents of babies who require neonatal care following birth;

- whether employers should have a duty to consider whether a job can be done flexibly and make that clear when advertising a role;

- options for requiring large employers (those with 250 or more employees) to publish their family-related leave and pay policies.

The Government's modern industrial strategy is creating a fairer and more equal workplace, to boost productivity and earning power for all. The consultation supports this by helping people manage their wider commitments in life benefiting both families and employers.

The consultation on parental leave and pay will run for 16 weeks and will end on 8 November.

The remaining consultations will run for 12 weeks until 11 October 2019. The consultation can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/good-work-plan-proposals-to-support-families>.

I am placing a copy of the consultation in the Library of the House.

[HCWS1782]

Petitions

Monday 22 July 2019

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Education Funding

The petition of residents of the constituency of Colchester in Essex,

Declares that more money should be allocated to schools and colleges to ensure that every child in Colchester receives the education they deserve; notes that while Education funding has increased, the cost pressures on schools and colleges have increased at a faster rate and schools and colleges have to take difficult decisions that will impact on the education they are able to provide; further notes that schools need certainty of funding in order to set three year budgets.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to:

Allocate more money to schools and colleges.

Provide schools and colleges with at least a three year funding settlement to provide certainty.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Will Quince.*]

[P002501]

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Hull Paragon Station Gate

The petition of Residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that it is wrong to restrict access to the only pick-up and drop-off point at Hull Paragon Station, by closing the Anlaby Road gates throughout the day; notes that for many disabled people, this is the only accessible route into the station (access to only disabled car parking spaces); further notes that First TransPennine's suggestion that people should call a mobile number and wait to be admitted will result in (a) disabled people being left vulnerable while waiting to be admitted, (b) longer journey and waiting times and (c) disabled people being treated differently to able bodied people and calls on First TransPennine to provide unrestricted access to this point.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to put pressure on the Government to work with First TransPennine Express and provide unrestricted access to the only pick-up and drop-off point and disabled car parking spaces at Hull Paragon Station, by leaving the Anlaby Road gate open throughout the day.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Emma Hardy, Official Report, 9 July 2019; Vol. 663, c. 284.*]

[P002489]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Ghani):

The closure of the Anlaby Road gates is for a three-month trial which started on 17 June and will finish on 6 September, after which TransPennine Express (TPE) will assess whether the results of the trial justify extending the closure. TPE closed this gate to try and curb vandalism

and antisocial behaviour in full consultation with, among others, the British Transport Police (BTP) and it was a BTP approved solution to at least carry out a three-month trial to see if this reduced vandalism and antisocial behaviour. TPE is assessing the results of the trial on a week-by-week basis and at the end of the trial, it will assess the results overall based on the evidence gathered.

Ultimately, though, it is the Government's view that this is an operational matter for the station operator, TPE, to consider. The Anlaby Road exit/entrance at Hull Paragon station is not the only accessible route into and out of the Interchange. Passengers who have a disability or those who require extra assistance to use train/bus services and want to use the Anlaby Road exit/entrance can call the dedicated number which is clearly signposted and provided audibly at the entrance. TPE also provides full travel assistance for older and disabled customers. This can be arranged and booked at any time up to two hours before arrival/departure (if travelling from Hull to a TPE managed station) by calling TPE's Assisted Travel Team on 0800 107 2149 or using an on-line booking form¹.

The toilets at Hull Paragon station were rebuilt as new as part of a £1.6 million refurbishment and were opened last year. TPE is looking to expand the toilets and waiting room. This is currently going through the design process and is due to be built later this year. It has received funding of £90,000 for this project, which will be to a high anti-vandalisation specification. This work will start after a programme of works by the station operator has been carried out.

¹ www.tpexpress.co.uk/travelling-with-us/assisted-travel

St Rollox Railway Works

The petition of Residents of Glasgow,

Declares that the permanent closure of St Rollox Railway Works would lose hundreds of well-paid jobs; further that the restoration of Garratt steam locomotive 'Springbok' which was originally built in Springburn and is currently decaying in the Summerlee Heritage Park, Coatbridge would provide an excellent project to maintain the workforce until a new operator for the site could be found; further that the restoration of a steam engine for heritage purposes would not engage state-aid restriction; further that there is a need for the UK and Scottish Governments to collaborate on finding a sustainable railway engineering use for the St Rollox Railway Works site to extend the current 160 years of industrial excellence and railway engineering in Springburn; further notes that signatures have been collected on another petition to save the St Rollox Railway Works.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with the Scottish Government to jointly financially support the restoration of the Garratt steam locomotive 'Springbok' and to use the time thus provided to identify a new operator to guarantee the future of the St Rollox Railway Works.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Mr Paul Sweeney, Official Report, 10 July 2019; Vol. 663, c. 412.*]

[P002492]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones):

When the possible closure of the St Rollox works was debated in the House of Commons earlier this year, colleagues and I recognised the historical importance of the site, and agreed that the closure and associated job losses would have a significant impact on the local economy. I noted then the proposal that those with an interest in the site might find a new arrangement that allows continued operation at the site on a commercial basis and in the interest of all parties.

I recognise the importance of the rail supply chain. Thousands of individual companies have helped to deliver a safe railway with relatively high passenger satisfaction against the background of a doubling of passenger numbers since privatisation. These companies are also significant employers in the communities where they operate and make an important contribution to the UK economy.

Both delivery of rail services and economic development are devolved matters. I would encourage local partners to continue to work together to deliver a suitable outcome.

Ministerial Correction

Monday 22 July 2019

CABINET OFFICE

Contaminated Blood Inquiry

The following is an extract from questions to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office on 10 July 2019.

Diana Johnson: The Minister is absolutely right, but with one victim dying every 96 hours and compensation still not being paid, I wrote to the Prime Minister, along with seven Opposition party leaders, to ask for compensation to be paid now. The Prime Minister has refused. I then wrote to the two Conservative party leadership candidates on 21 June, because they are making huge spending commitments, but I have not had the courtesy of a response. Perhaps the Minister could help me with that.

Mr Lidington: I am happy to try to prompt a response to the hon. Lady's letter. She will know that the Department of Health and Social Care has announced a major

uplift in the financial support available to beneficiaries of the infected blood scheme in England, and talks are now going on with the devolved Governments about trying to get a UK-wide agreement. Questions of legal liability fall therefore to compensation and are expressly a matter for the independent inquiry.

[Official Report, 10 July 2019, Vol. 663, c. 302.]

Letter of correction from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office.

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson).

The correct response should have been:

Mr Lidington: I am happy to try to prompt a response to the hon. Lady's letter. She will know that the Department of Health and Social Care has announced a major uplift in the financial support available to beneficiaries of the infected blood scheme in England, and talks are now going on with the devolved Governments about trying to get a UK-wide agreement. **Any award of compensation will depend on a determination of legal liability, to which the inquiry's determinations and recommendations may be relevant.**

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**not later than
Monday 29 July 2019**

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