

**Wednesday
24 July 2019**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 24 July 2019

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

ROYAL ASSENT

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

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc.) Act 2019

National Insurance Contributions (Termination Awards and Sporting Testimonials) Act 2019

Wild Animals in Circuses Act 2019.

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

STANDING ORDERS (PRIVATE BUSINESS)

Ordered,

That the new Standing Order relating to Private Business stated in the Schedule be made.

Schedule

“118A Power of Committee of Selection to sit when House adjourned

(1) The Committee of Selection shall have leave to sit at any time on any day on which the House sits.

(2) On days on which the House does not sit, the Committee of Selection may sit only with the leave of the Chairman of Ways and Means, the grant of which shall be entered in the formal minutes of the Committee; and no notice of a meeting on a day on which the House does not sit may be given unless accompanied by a notice of the grant of such leave.”—(*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

20 Years of Devolution

1. **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the merits of the devolution of powers to Scotland over the last 20 years. [912059]

10. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the merits of the devolution of powers to Scotland over the last 20 years. [912068]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): As there will not be another opportunity for Scottish questions before September, I draw the House's attention

to an issue that was raised in an earlier session of Scottish questions. I am sure that you, Mr Speaker, will join me in looking forward to the Murray trophy ATP Challenger tournament that will take place in Glasgow from 16 to 22 September. We all welcome this positive addition to the tennis calendar, and I particularly look forward to welcoming you, Mr Speaker, to the tournament.

After 20 years, I believe that the current devolution settlement is the right balance, with appropriate decisions being taken for Scotland at Holyrood and for the whole UK in this Parliament. Since the first Scotland Act, Holyrood has become one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world.

John Mc Nally: On the devolution of powers, my question to the Secretary of State is about Falkirk Council's growth deal bid to both the Scottish Government and the UK Government. To give him credit, he has taken a keen interest in the proposed deal. As he well knows, it is an ambitious bid to bring together horizontal community and business integration. Will he update my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) and me on the timeline for the investment zone and growth deal bid? Will he assure us on where the business case will sit in respect of the new Government?

David Mundell: I commend the hon. Gentleman and his colleague, the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), on their lobbying efforts for the Falkirk deal. The UK Government are committed to taking forward that deal. After a productive meeting with the leader of Falkirk Council earlier this week, we are looking forward to the council submitting proposals by the end of August and to a presentation in September.

Patrick Grady: I am glad the Secretary of State seems to think that constitutional perfection has now been reached on these islands. I wonder whether that means he agrees with his new party leader, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), who told a group of activists that we do not need

“an England-only parliament. We have an England parliament, it's in Westminster.”

If the Secretary of State does agree with that, does that not make his post and, indeed, all of us who represent Scotland a little redundant? If he does not agree, why has he been so effusive in welcoming his new leader? Is it perhaps because he himself does not want to be made redundant?

David Mundell: If that was a question about a separate English Parliament, I should say that I am clear, as is the new leader of the Conservative party, that England does not need its own separate Parliament.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the incoming Prime Minister must deliver certainty, confidence and prosperity for the whole UK, to counter the politics of grievance and defeat?

David Mundell: Yes.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Given that, 20 years on, fewer than half the people in Scotland think that devolution has led to better outcomes in education, health or the growth of the Scottish economy,

does my right hon. Friend agree that what Scotland needs is a Government who will utilise with full effect Holyrood's extensive powers, not deflect and delay powers like the Scottish National party has done?

David Mundell: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend and it is a message that I get back from my own constituents. They want to see the Scottish Parliament focusing on education, health, and transport—the issues that are important to their daily lives—and not pursuing an obsession with the constitution.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the frustrations that those of us who cherish devolution feel is the SNP's apparent reticence to use many of the Scottish Parliament's powers. For example, what a difference they could make to the lives of the 6,000 WASPI women in my constituency of Edinburgh West if they used the powers they had to alleviate the difficulties, rather than using them as another grievance.

David Mundell: May I begin by asking the hon. Lady to pass on my congratulations to her new UK leader? It is very good to see a Scottish MP in that role. I agree wholeheartedly with her sentiment. It is well documented that if, having aligned themselves to the WASPI cause, the SNP Government really wanted to do something for WASPI women, they have the power and, indeed, the capacity to raise the resources to do so.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the benefits of devolution is when our two Governments work together, such as with the Moray growth deal? The £32.5 million from the UK Government was matched by the Scottish Government, which means that it will make a real difference to the whole of Moray. Therefore, devolution delivers when our Governments work together.

David Mundell: I commend my hon. Friend for his tireless efforts to pursue the Moray growth deal, which has been raised at every Scottish questions during his tenure. Yes, the Scottish and UK Governments working together is the best way to deliver for the people of Scotland. Let us see more of it.

Leaving the EU: Effect on the Union

2. Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Prime Minister on the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the Union. [912060]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The UK Government's policy has been to strengthen our Union of nations; it is at the heart of all that we do and has guided our approach to our exit from the EU.

Ian Murray: If the Secretary of State were to abide by his promises, it would be his last day in office, so I wish him well and thank him for his unstinting courtesy in that role. The new Prime Minister's election yesterday means that the Scottish Conservative and Unionist party is now the Scottish Conservative and Brexit party, which means that it is abandoning Unionism. Is not the

new Prime Minister now as big a threat to the Union, if not a bigger threat to the Union, than any nationalist, and what will the Secretary of State do about it?

David Mundell: That is a bit rich coming from the hon. Gentleman, whom I have always respected in my deliberations from the Dispatch Box. I think that he would agree with commentary this week that one of the biggest threats to the continuation of the United Kingdom is the total and utter collapse of the Scottish Labour party.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): More than 100 powers that are currently held in Brussels are to be transferred to Holyrood after Brexit. Therefore, does my right hon. Friend agree that, far from removing powers from Scotland, leaving the EU will give the Scottish Parliament more power?

David Mundell: What my hon. Friend says is absolutely correct. We have been subjected again, as we have so many times during this Session, to hearing about a power grab, but not once have we heard the identity of a single power that is being grabbed. Instead, what is identified is the fact that more than 100 powers and responsibilities are coming to the Scottish Parliament.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): What I am interested in is the conversations that the right hon. Gentleman has had with his soon-to-be Prime Minister, because what he has said in the past is that it would be "extremely difficult" to stay in a Cabinet under the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). Will he ever develop anything approaching a backbone, or are Ruth's Scottish Conservatives now the exclusive property of their biggest electoral liability?

David Mundell: I have always admired the hon. Gentleman's consistency. Last week, when I appeared before the Scottish Affairs Committee, he said that he hoped I would not resign and that I would be in post for months and years.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that leaving the EU provides many opportunities for the businesses, communities and people across Scotland, not least for the fishing communities in places such as my constituency of Banff and Buchan when we leave the common fisheries policy and become an independent coastal state?

David Mundell: I absolutely do, and I always commend my hon. Friend for being such a champion of the fishing industry. Yesterday, I met the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, which remains excited and upbeat about the prospect of Britain leaving the EU and the hated common fisheries policy.

Lesley Laird (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): Politics is about principles. A few months ago, the Secretary of State told us that the threat to the integrity of the United Kingdom was "the principal issue" for him, but he also told us:

"Mr Johnson and I do not agree on a whole range of issues, and I do not see myself able to serve in this way."

So how far will the Secretary of State allow his principles to be stretched in defence of the Union, just so he can keep his job?

David Mundell: I am not going to take any lessons on the question of leadership from the hon. Lady. Only yesterday, she said that

“we need a serious, mature politician who can be relied upon to keep his promises”

to be our Prime Minister. I am sure she was not referring to Richard Leonard or the leader of the Labour party.

Lesley Laird: I think that we would find more maturity in both those quarters than we might in the Prime Minister to be. However, those were the Secretary of State's opinions, although he has obviously traded them in and got some new ones. He wants us to believe and that this Government are guardians of the Union, yet by pandering to the dog-whistle politics of English nationalism, the next Prime Minister has already abandoned the tradition of the Conservative and Unionist party. The Tory party is now a real and present danger to the integrity of the United Kingdom, so will the Secretary of State now confirm that he will not sell out the people of Scotland and that he will not be part of a no-deal Cabinet?

David Mundell: The hon. Lady has a nerve. Her position has been to sell out to the SNP. She told her colleagues that she would gladly give up her own seat to the SNP so that there could be a Labour-SNP alliance that would inevitably lead to another independence referendum. But to give her credit, she is doing a pretty good job of crashing the Scottish Labour party in the polls—losing two MEPs and finishing fifth in the European elections. Only the Scottish Conservative and Unionist party in Scotland will stand up for our United Kingdom, and I will certainly continue to do so.

Leaving the EU: No Deal

3. **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the economic effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [912061]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The Government delivered on our commitment to provide objective analysis to Parliament of how exiting the EU may affect the economy of the UK and its sectors, nations and regions in the long run.

Bambos Charalambous: Previous estimates have indicated that a no-deal Brexit could cost Scotland over 100,000 jobs. On that basis, will the Secretary of State confirm to the House that he will never serve in a Government whose policy is to leave without a deal?

David Mundell: My position on no deal is quite clear compared to the hon. Gentleman's. On the three occasions that I had the opportunity to vote for a deal, I did so; he and most of his Labour colleagues did not.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Deal or no deal, Scotland faces a £1 billion financial hole, £737 million of which will be bridged by funds from Westminster funded by other parts of the United

Kingdom. What analysis has my right hon. Friend done of how deep that hole would be if Scotland was separated from the rest of the United Kingdom?

David Mundell: It is well known that there would be a multibillion-pound funding gap in the event of Scottish independence that could only be dealt with by significant tax rises or cuts in services. Those who propose independence have still not answered the question on where that money is to be found.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): A no-deal Brexit will be catastrophic for Scotland's hill farmers, especially those looking to export sheepmeat to the European Union. That is not just my view but the view of the National Farmers Union Scotland and the NFU across the four parts of the United Kingdom. Can the Secretary of State give me and them some assurance that he will not just sit in Cabinet and watch their livelihoods destroyed?

David Mundell: I have been very clear throughout my time in Cabinet about the importance of agriculture to Scotland and the needs of Scotland's agriculture industry, and I will continue to be so.

Mr Speaker: I call Angela Crawley. She is not here.

Drug Consumption Room (Glasgow)

5. **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on the potential merits of establishing a medically supervised drug consumption room in Glasgow. [912063]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The causes of drug misuse are complex and need a range of policy responses. I am aware that the Home Secretary has offered to meet Scottish Government Public Health Minister Joe FitzPatrick to discuss a broad range of issues around the tragic matter of drug-related deaths in Scotland.

Alison Thewliss: I am glad that the Home Secretary is finally going to meet the Scottish Government on this. When NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde published its proposals for a supervised drug consumption in 2016, the number of drug-related deaths stood at 257; last year, it was 394. So I ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, how many people would still be alive in the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde area if the Home Office had not blocked, for ideological reasons, drug consumption rooms in Glasgow?

David Mundell: As I said in my initial response, issues around drug misuse are complex and need a range of policy responses. I welcome the fact that the summit that my Scottish Parliament colleague Miles Briggs MSP suggested is going to go ahead. I can confirm that UK Government Ministers will take part in that, and I am sure that all the issues will be discussed on that occasion.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Scotland's drug death rate is three times higher than in the rest of the UK. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that

in addition to UK-wide action, the Scottish Government should be using their substantial powers over healthcare, education, housing and criminal justice to tackle this?

David Mundell: I do agree with my hon. Friend. Of course the UK Government want to work closely with the Scottish Government on this. The statistics released last week are shocking to everyone in Scotland and, indeed, throughout the United Kingdom, but it should not be suggested that any of the UK Government's policy decisions are the sole answer to this issue: it is complex, and the powers that the Scottish Parliament already has will go a long way towards dealing with it.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Two weeks ago, my constituent Chelsea Bruce died in a drugs-related incident. She was just 16 years old. The time for handwringing is over. We know that drug consumption rooms, drop-in testing and even safe clinical prescribing of illicit drugs will save lives. The international body of evidence is unequivocal, yet the Secretary of State has been sceptical and vague on this. If only he would show some leadership in urgently finding a route through the impasse between the Home Office and the Lord Advocate to help to rapidly roll out these facilities in Glasgow and across Scotland. How many more must die before the Secretary of State recognises this public health emergency and acts to save these lives?

David Mundell: That sort of politicking is completely unworthy of this serious debate. The Home Office, the UK Government and, with respect, the Scottish Government take this issue seriously. We are going to have a summit in early course to discuss all the issues around this, and I sincerely hope, because I have had constituents die as well, that we can move forward.

Further Devolution

6. **Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Prime Minister on the devolution of further powers to Scotland. [912064]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I have regular meetings with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who has been unwavering in her passionate support for our Union. We have regularly discussed the UK Government's continued commitment to the devolution settlement and to a strong Scotland within a strong United Kingdom.

Martin Whitfield: If the Secretary of State is in his place later, what will he do to keep Scotland in its place in the UK?

David Mundell: I will continue to do as I have done for the past four and a bit years, and that is relentlessly to make the positive case for the benefit of Scotland being in the United Kingdom and to the United Kingdom of having Scotland in it.

11. [912070] **David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): Britain will be leaving the European Union on 31 October, under our excellent new Prime Minister. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, when we do so, 100 extra powers will be devolved to the Scottish

Parliament, meaning that Conservatives and Brexiteers are the true friends of devolution and a strong Scottish Parliament?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend makes a pertinent point. This party and this Government have been committed to the devolution settlement and to making it work. There is one party in this Parliament that would destroy devolution, and that is the SNP.

Leaving the EU: No Deal

7. **Stewart Hosie** (Dundee East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Prime Minister on the effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [912065]

12. **Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Prime Minister on the effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [912071]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I have had regular discussions with the Prime Minister on a range of matters related to exiting the EU. It is essential that we respect the result of the 2016 referendum vote to leave the EU.

Stewart Hosie: A no-deal Brexit combined with ending free movement of people, which is the inbound Prime Minister's prospectus, would restrict Scottish business and the public sector from recruiting the staff they need, yet the Secretary of State has welcomed the appointment of the inbound Prime Minister. Can we conclude then that he is prepared to throw business and public services under a bus simply to protect his own career?

David Mundell: What amounts to throwing Scotland under a bus has been the actions of the SNP throughout the Brexit debates in this Parliament—voting three times against an agreement that would have allowed Scotland to leave the EU on an orderly basis and largely in accordance with its own document, "Scotland's Place in Europe".

Douglas Chapman: In recent weeks, I have read reports that house prices in London are falling and job vacancies are down—two classic signs of an economy going into recession—and I can add to this mix the potential for a no-deal Boris Brexit boorach. Given these circumstances, what is the Secretary of State's plan B for the Scottish economy?

David Mundell: The incoming Prime Minister has been very clear that he wants to leave the EU with a deal, and that is the best outcome for Scotland.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Let me read this for fear of misquoting the Secretary of State. He told the last Scottish Conservative party conference:

"Unfortunately Mr Johnson seems to behave in a way that suggests he is only focused on his own self interest and not on the interests of our country, and I find that very disappointing."

Has the Secretary of State now overcome his disappointment, and will he continue to serve the new Prime Minister?

David Mundell: Just like the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues, everything I have ever said is on the record. What I want to make clear is that my priority remains Scotland's place within the United Kingdom, and that—in government or out—will be my continuing priority.

Tommy Sheppard: The House will observe that that is not actually an answer to my question. The Secretary of State sits besides Cabinet colleagues who have demonstrated integrity and conviction in deciding that they will resign over the question of a no-deal Brexit. If he is against a no-deal Brexit, would it not be a better look for Scotland for him to do likewise, rather than wait to be sacked or abolished?

David Mundell: Of course, the hon. Gentleman's position is not a deal Brexit or a no-deal Brexit; it is no Brexit. That is what he is seeking to bring about. There is no evidence that the SNP has at any time been serious about getting a deal for Scotland. On each occasion it has had the opportunity to vote for a deal, it has voted against it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Finally, and briefly, Anna Soubry.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (IGC): I hope that the Secretary of State will stay in post, but apparently that means he will have to sign the pledge, because in order to serve in the next Government he and others will have to agree to leaving the EU come 31 October, deal or no deal. So will he be at the Dispatch Box again—yes or no—or are these his last questions?

David Mundell: I fear that the hon. Lady's endorsement will have sealed my fate.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [912144] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 24 July.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. Following my duties in this House, this afternoon I shall have an audience of Her Majesty the Queen. I shall then continue with my duties in this House from the Back Benches, where I will continue to be the Member of Parliament for Maidenhead.

Ruth Cadbury: I profoundly disagree with many of the decisions that the Prime Minister has made and many of the things she says, but I recognise that she does have a respect for public service and for the future of our country, so how does she feel about handing over to a man who, among many things, is happy to demonise Muslims, is prepared to chuck our loyal public servants and diplomats under a bus, and promises to sell our country out to Donald Trump and his friends?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to hand over to an incoming leader of the Conservative party and Prime Minister who I worked with when he was in my Cabinet, and who is committed, as a Conservative who stood on a Conservative manifesto in 2017, to delivering on the vote of the British people in 2016 and to delivering a bright future for this country.

Q5. [912148] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I rise to thank my right hon. Friend not only for her loyal service as Prime Minister over the past three years, but for her 33 years of public service, which is a record to be proud of. I also thank her for her personal support in helping me get my private Member's Bill—now the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017—on to the statute book. Does she agree that it is far better to prevent people becoming homeless, to use the taxation system to combat obesity, and to prevent people smoking in the first place? Does she agree that prevention is far better than cure?

The Prime Minister: First of all, I thank my hon. Friend for all his work on the Homelessness Reduction Act, which, crucially, we are seeing actually having an impact—that is so important for the people who are benefiting from the work he did. I know that he has been doing a lot of work as part of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health. I agree that we need to start viewing health as an asset to protect throughout our lives. That is why we have taken bold action on smoking and childhood obesity. I am proud that we have delivered not only the biggest ever cash boost in the history of the national health service, but a long-term plan that, as he said, will focus on prevention—as well as on cancer care and mental health—trying to ensure that people do not get ill in the first place. Preventing smoking and obesity are key parts of better lives for people in the future.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Today marks the final day in office for the Prime Minister, and I pay tribute to her sense of public duty. Public service should always be recognised. Being an MP, a Minister or indeed a Prime Minister is an honour that brings with it huge responsibility and huge pressures personally and, I am sure the Prime Minister and probably the whole House would agree, on those very closest to us, who are often not able to answer back for the criticisms made against them. I hope she has a marginally more relaxing time on the Back Benches. Perhaps, like the Chancellor, she will even help me oppose the reckless plans of her successor. *[Interruption.]* If I may continue—*[Interruption.]* I am glad the Government party is in such good heart today, for tomorrow it won't be.

In the past three years, child poverty has gone up, pensioner poverty has gone up, in-work poverty has gone up, violent crime has gone up, NHS waiting times have gone up, school class sizes have gone up, homelessness has gone up and food bank use has gone up. Does the Prime Minister have any regrets about any of the things I have just said?

The Prime Minister: It is very good to see the Conservative party in good heart; it is more than I can say for the Labour party. But let me just say something to the right hon. Gentleman about my record over the past three years and how I measure it. It is in the

opportunity for every child who is now in a better school. It is in the comfort for every person who now has a job for the first time in their life. It is in the hope of every disadvantaged young person now able to go to university. It is in the joy of every couple who can now move into their own home. At its heart, politics is not about exchanges across the Dispatch Box. Nor is it about eloquent speeches or media headlines. Politics is about the difference we make every day to the lives of people up and down this country. They are our reason for being here, and we should never forget it.

Jeremy Corbyn: Yes, politics is about real life and politics is about what people suffer in their ordinary lives. I did not mention that per-pupil school funding has gone down, police numbers are down and GP numbers are falling. In the 2017 Conservative manifesto, the Prime Minister promised that no school would have its budget cut, that she would protect TV licences for the over-75s and that she would halve rough sleeping. Which of those pledges is the Prime Minister most sorry not to have achieved?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to hear that the right hon. Gentleman spent some time reading the Conservative party manifesto from 2017—he has not been known for always reading the documents he stands up and talks about. Had he read the manifesto properly, he would know that we made a pledge on rough sleeping: to halve it by 2022 and to stop rough sleeping by 2027. I am pleased to say that in the past year we have seen rough sleeping going down. In particular, rough sleeping is going down in those areas where this Government have been taking action.

Jeremy Corbyn: I do not quite know where the Prime Minister gets her figures from on rough sleeping. All I know is that I travel around this country, just like other Members of this House, and I talk to people who have had a disaster in their lives and end up rough sleeping. We are the fifth richest country in the world. It is surely wrong that anyone should end up sleeping on the streets of this country. We can and should do something about it.

I have often disagreed with the Prime Minister and have many criticisms of her policies, but I welcome the reduction in the stake on fixed odds betting terminals, the adoption of the children's funeral fund and the scrapping of employment tribunal fees. Which of those policies is the Prime Minister most proud of?

The Prime Minister: I am proud of all the policies that we have introduced that have been improving people's lives. I am proud of the fact that through our balanced management of the economy, we now see more people in work in this country than ever before. I am proud of the fact that there are more children in good and outstanding schools. I am proud of the fact that the attainment gap between the disadvantaged and the advantaged has been narrowed under this Government. And I am proud of the fact that we are putting the biggest cash boost in its history into our national health service. We are ensuring that the national health service—the most beloved institution in this country—will be there for people into the future. This is a Conservative Government—my Government—delivering on the things that matter to people in their day-to-day lives.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister may have noticed that none of those things that I mentioned were actually in the Conservative party manifesto in 2017, but every one of them was a Labour pledge in 2017. On Brexit, the Prime Minister's own red lines ruled out any sensible compromise deal. Only after she had missed her own deadline to leave did the Prime Minister even begin to shift her position, but by then, she no longer had the authority to deliver. Her successor has no mandate at all. Does she have confidence that the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) will succeed where she has not?

The Prime Minister: I worked tirelessly to get a good deal for the UK, and I also worked hard to get that deal through this Parliament. I voted for the deal. What did the right hon. Gentleman do? He voted against a deal. He voted to make no deal more likely, and when there was a prospect of reaching consensus across this House, the right hon. Gentleman walked away from the talks. At every stage, his only interest has been playing party politics, and frankly, he should be ashamed of himself.

Jeremy Corbyn: We have had three years of bungled negotiations, and we now have the spectacle of a Prime Minister coming into office with no electoral mandate looking for a Brexit deal that has been ruled out by the European Union, or in the case of a no deal, ruled out by the majority in this House and by anyone who understands the dangers to the British economy of a no deal. The next Prime Minister thought the Isle of Man was in the European Union and that the European Union made rules about kippers that, in fact, were made by the Government that he was part of. He also said that the UK could secure tariff-free trade through article 24 of the general agreement on tariffs and trade, despite the International Trade Secretary, the Attorney General and the Governor of the Bank of England all confirming that that is not possible.

At the start of 2018, the—[*Interruption.*] It's coming, don't worry. At the start of 2018, the Prime Minister herself set up a new unit to counter fake news, charged with "combating disinformation". How successful does she think that has been?

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that I fear that our success has not been what we wanted it to be from the amount of fake news and fake information that he uses at that Dispatch Box.

Jeremy Corbyn: Maybe the Prime Minister can have a word with her successor on the way out, but let me conclude—[*Interruption.*] For today. Let me conclude by welcoming some of the Prime Minister's notable U-turns over the last couple of years. The cruel dementia tax was scrapped. Plans to bring back grammar schools were ditched. The threat to the pensions triple lock was abandoned. The withdrawal of the winter fuel payments was dumped. The pledge to bring back foxhunting was dropped, and the Government binned their plan to end universal free school meals for five to seven-year-olds. The Prime Minister has dumped her own manifesto. Given that her successor has no mandate from the people—no mandate on which to move into office—does she not agree that the best thing that the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip could do later on today when he takes office is to call a general election and let the people decide their future?

The Prime Minister: My first answer to the right hon. Gentleman is no. If he wants to talk about people ducking manifesto commitments and commitments made during general election campaigns, might I remind him that the Labour party and he said that they would abolish student debt? After the election, he rowed back on that promise. What else did he say during the general election campaign? He said he was committed to Trident. What did he say afterwards? He said, no, he was not committed to Trident at all. He has broken promise after promise to the people of this country.

As this is the last time that the right hon. Gentleman and I will have this exchange across these Dispatch Boxes—[HON. MEMBER: “Are you going to answer the question?”] I was going to say that it is a strength of our British democracy that the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition have these exchanges across the Dispatch Boxes every week, two swords’ lengths apart, and that no quarter is sought and none is given. That is as it should be in our adversarial parliamentary democracy. But he and I are very different people and very different politicians and we approach the issues the country faces in different ways. I have spent all but one of my years in the House on the Front Bench trying to implement the policies I believe in, while he has spent most of his time on the Back Benches campaigning for what he believes in, often against his own party, but what we have in common is a commitment to our constituencies. I saw that after the terrorist attack in Finsbury Park mosque in his constituency. Perhaps then I could finish by saying this: as a party leader who has accepted when her time is up, might I suggest that perhaps the time is now for him to do the same? [HON. MEMBERS: “More!”]

Mr Speaker: I call Glyn Davies.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con) *rose*—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Don’t be shy, Mr Davies. Assert yourself, man. We must hear from you.

Q7. [912150] **Glyn Davies** (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I first met the Prime Minister when she came campaigning with me in Berriew in the difficult and dark days of the late 1990s, and she has been a great friend of Wales ever since. Only recently, her Government approved the end of the M4 tolls and several other great measures for Wales. Will she encourage her successor to introduce a Bill to extend the general election franchise to all British citizens living overseas, where there is a wide Welsh diaspora?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks and for highlighting the work the Government have done in Wales. I would add that over 95,000 people in Wales had a pay rise this year as a result of the national living wage and that employment in Wales has risen by 167,000 since 2010. Conservatives have indeed been delivering for Wales. I know the concern about the franchise for overseas voters and I am sure that my successor will wish to look at that.

I discovered a new part of my hon. Friend’s past recently. I believe he was once the bodyguard to the legendary Hollywood actress Lauren Bacall. [*Interruption.*] I think his red face tells us all.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Prime Minister, it is fair to say that we have had our differences—it has not often been a meeting of minds—but, with her standing down today, the time for holding her to account has passed. The burdens of office are considerable, the loneliness of leadership can be stark. At times we have clashed on points of political difference, but equally we have stood together when it has been right to do so—over Salisbury and other threats to the UK’s national security. She rightly made sure that Opposition leaders were informed at key moments in national security. In particular, her chief of staff, Gavin Barwell, always sought to make sure that I was kept informed of important developments. Prime Minister, I wish you and Philip all the best for the future.

As the Prime Minister departs, is she confident that the office of Prime Minister can be upheld by her flagrant successor?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks. He is absolutely right: he and I have a difference of opinion on some key issues, but I have been grateful for the position that the SNP has taken on key issues of national security, when it has stood alongside the Government as we have faced the actions of our enemy. I understand the right hon. Gentleman’s point about keeping Opposition leaders in touch with things that have happened. I would also like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Gavin Barwell, who was a first-class Member of this House, a first-class Minister, and has been an absolutely first-class chief of staff.

In answer to the right hon. Gentleman’s question: yes, I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) on winning the Conservative leadership election. He will take over as Prime Minister and I look forward to a first-class Conservative Government under his leadership, delivering for the whole of the United Kingdom.

Ian Blackford: The Prime Minister-elect has no mandate in Scotland. He has no mandate from the people. The Government he is busy forming have no mandate in Scotland. Scotland deserves better. A snap YouGov poll shows that 60% of people in Scotland are dismayed and disappointed by the new Prime Minister.

Those of us on the SNP Benches have tabled an early-day motion, with friends from parties across this House, rejecting the idea of this House being shut down before November. Following Parliament’s overwhelming message in last week’s vote, may I invite the Prime Minister, in one of her first actions as a Back-Bench MP, to sign our early-day motion and join efforts to stop the suspension of Parliament under any circumstances?

The Prime Minister: As I said in answer to the right hon. Gentleman’s first question, I accept that he and I have differences on a number of issues. We both have a passion for delivering for the people of Scotland. I want to do that with Scotland as part of the United Kingdom; he wants to take Scotland out of the United Kingdom. We have a mandate from the people to form a Government of this country. That is how we run things in the parliamentary democracy that we have in this country. We also have a mandate from the people to deliver on the result of the 2016 referendum. If the right hon.

Gentleman is so interested in delivering on mandates from the British people, he should have voted on the deal to take us out of the EU.

Q9. [912152] **Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): The Derwent valley cycle way is an aspirational project running through my constituency. It would create an off-road cycle way between Derby and Baslow, providing an alternative commuting route, encouraging tourism, encouraging cycling among the young, and improving the health of the local population. Does the Prime Minister agree that more funding should be made available to support this and other, similar projects?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the importance of increasing cycling and walking. It is important for people's health and the local environment. Schemes such as the Derwent valley cycle way provide significant benefit to the local economy as well as to health and the environment. We have doubled our spending on cycling and walking in England, and our local cycling and walking infrastructure plan enables local authorities to take a strategic approach to planning improvements and to integrate them into wider plans for transport and economic development. I am sure the issue will continue to be supported by Conservatives in government.

Q2. [912145] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): In Newcastle, the Prime Minister's departure invokes neither the despair of a Rafa Benitez nor yet the joy of a Mike Ashley, and she may take comfort from that, but as she considers her choices—House of Lords, dignified retirement, working with her successor—may I ask her to work to bring dignity and choice to others? She is a WASPI woman; will she dedicate her prime ministerial retirement to justice for all WASPI women?

The Prime Minister: We have put £1 billion extra into the pension system, recognising concerns that were expressed by women about the changes to pensions. The hon. Lady references what I am going to be doing in the future, but I thought I had already made that very clear: I will be continuing in this House as the Member of Parliament for Maidenhead.

West Midlands Combined Authority

Q14. [912157] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What assessment she has made of the economic performance of the region governed by the West Midlands Combined Authority since that authority's formation; and if she will make a statement.

The Prime Minister: I am sure my hon. Friend will want to join me in saying how pleased I am with the economic growth that we have seen in the West Midlands Combined Authority area. Output has increased by 27% over five years; productivity increased at twice the national rate last year; and employment has increased since 2011. The record of the West Midlands Combined Authority shows precisely what a local, visible, innovative leadership can do and how it can be the key to building a strong economy and a fairer society.

Michael Fabricant: With the Prime Minister's active encouragement the Mayor of the West Midlands was elected in May 2017, and she has supported him and the region ever since. Over £2 billion has been given to the region by the Prime Minister in the form of grants and guarantees for transport and so many other worthwhile projects, so on behalf of the people of the west midlands may I thank her and may I also ask that she continues in Parliament as a strong advocate for local devolution?

The Prime Minister: I remember the conversation I had with Andy Street when I was encouraging him to stand for the mayoralty of the west midlands, and I am very pleased that he did. He has been delivering for the people of the west midlands ever since his election. I also thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the excellent work that we have done for the west midlands: Government working with that combined authority shows the benefits of the very local devolution that my hon. Friend has referred to. This is a very good example of what that innovative and visionary leadership can do at a local level in improving the lives of people.

Engagements

Q3. [912146] **Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): Outgoing American Presidents get to pardon anybody they want. If the Prime Minister could, would she pardon her successor for sabotaging her premiership purely for his own personal ambitions?

The Prime Minister: My successor will continue to deliver the Conservative policies that have improved the lives of people up and down this country since we were elected into a coalition Government in 2010. There is a long list of improvements that have taken place in people's lives, and I look forward, on the Back Benches, to giving my full support to the next Prime Minister as he takes us forward, delivering on Brexit and continuing to deliver on those Conservative policies.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): May I thank my right hon. Friend for the way in which she has conducted herself as Prime Minister of this country, for the dignified way in which she has approached the job and her responsibilities? May I ask her to reflect on the fact that when we both first joined the Government in 2010, for every £4 the Government were spending we were borrowing £1, yet as she leaves office today for every £34 the Government spend we are borrowing £1? She has left an economy that is in a much more stable position than when it was inherited. To do that she has had to make some very difficult choices, and choices we may not have wanted to make, but we have got the economy on a sound footing, and I thank her for that.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for pointing out that fact about Government borrowing and for highlighting the work we have done for the economy, delivering that balanced approach. I would like to thank my right hon. Friend the Chancellor for the work he has done in delivering that. What does that mean? It means borrowing at its lowest level for 17 years; it means the lowest unemployment since the 1970s, wages growing at their fastest for a decade and debt

falling. That is what my Government have delivered: more jobs, healthier finances and an economy fit for the future.

Q4. [912147] Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): The Education Committee published its report on Friday stating that the Government should urgently address underfunding in further education by increasing the amount from £4,000 per student to £4,760. Does the Prime Minister agree that raising the rate will benefit the excellent Bolton sixth-form college in my constituency, as well as many other colleges that are also under severe financial pressure, some of which are actually going under?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, I always look at Select Committee reports with care. I commissioned the Augar review of post-18 education funding, and that review has been very clear that more money needs to go into further education and into sixth forms. I want to see that happening. Indeed, I think that, just as my Government have given a priority to the national health service in looking at funding for the future, the next Government should give priority to education so that we can see that money going into further education and sixth forms and ensure that for every young person there is an avenue through education and training that suits them and their talents and gives them the best opportunities for their future.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): The Prime Minister has always been a great champion of victims of domestic violence, as Prime Minister and as Home Secretary, and she has directed many millions of pounds into improving those support services during her time in office, but does she agree that there is still much more work to be done on prevention and early intervention, and on tackling the ongoing scepticism that still greets many victims when they report violence?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising an important issue. I also thank her for the work for victims of domestic violence that she did in her legal practice prior to coming into this House. This is a very important issue, and I am proud of the Domestic Abuse Bill that has been introduced in this House. I look forward to the debates on the Bill as it goes through Parliament. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we need to continue to focus on prevention and continue to raise awareness. We must ensure that domestic violence is seen for what it is. These are criminal acts that are being perpetrated and they should not be brushed under the carpet. People should not just say, "Oh, it's something that happens behind closed doors" or "It's just a domestic". We need to take domestic violence very seriously. We need to ensure that we are taking appropriate action in relation to the perpetrators, and that victims are given support and feel confident and are able to come forward at the earliest opportunity to report what has happened to them.

Q8. [912151] John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): My constituent is the wife of Captain Dean Sprouting, who was a brave, experienced and decorated soldier with the UK military for 29 years. In January 2018, he was killed while serving in Iraq, and it is believed that he was killed by a forklift driven by US soldiers. Eighteen months

later, Captain Sprouting's family have still not had an answer as to how he came to his death. His death has not been fully investigated, and those driving the truck have not been brought to justice. Can the Prime Minister ensure that there will be a continuing investigation into the cause of his death?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised an issue of great concern, and I am sure it will be of concern to Members across the House and of course to the family of his constituent. I will ensure that the Ministry of Defence provides a response to him on this issue.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her work in supporting and overseeing the global health programme that the United Kingdom delivers overseas, particularly in regard to vaccination and most notably the polio eradication vaccination, for which she has been internationally recognised. The programme has saved and safeguarded millions of children's lives across the world. Does she agree that the need to combat misinformation about vaccination is now as important as it ever has been? Will she, in her memo to her successor, note the importance of this programme and the continuing need for a self-standing Department for International Development?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his reference to the work on polio, which enables me to commend the work of my constituent, Judith Diment, with Rotary International in its work against polio. It is important that we combat the disinformation about vaccinations and ensure that people are willing to have those vaccinations, which will change their lives and ensure that they can lead healthy lives, rather than succumbing to diseases and conditions that can have an impact on their lives. I can also say to him that I am proud of the fact that we have a Department for International Development, and proud of the fact that we have legislated for 0.7% of gross national income to be spent on development aid overseas. That is an important element of global Britain and an important element of our standing in the world.

Q10. [912153] Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Last Friday, I had the honour of witnessing the presentation of the légion d'honneur to Helene Aldwinckle, who is a constituent, for her work at Bletchley Park as a codebreaker in world war two. She played a critical role in defeating the most disgusting fascist ideology. Will the Prime Minister, on her last appearance at the Dispatch Box, join me in saying that all politicians should remember the common goals that united people such as Helene and must never resort to, nor fail to call out, nationalistic rhetoric which paints others as enemies, victimises minorities, or espouses racism, because if they do, they are neither fit to be a President nor a Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: As I have said on several occasions, it behoves all of us as politicians—indeed, everyone in public life—to be careful about the language we use and to ensure that we give a clear message that there is no place in our society for racism or hate crime. We should all act to ensure that we deliver on those sentiments. I thank Helene for her work at Bletchley Park and thank

all those who worked there. Unsung for some considerable time, they played a crucial part in our ability to defeat fascism in the second world war. We should be very proud of their work, and I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving the House the opportunity to celebrate it.

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): I begin by commending the Prime Minister for her stamina and courage in her term of office—whatever our views on Brexit and other issues—and also commend the support that she has received from her husband Philip. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] For many of us, our husbands, wives and partners are the unsung heroes. May I now ask her a specific question? She is going to the palace this afternoon, and we assume that she is going to recommend that the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) succeed her as Prime Minister, but will she tell the House one piece of real, hard advice that she would like to give him on being Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: Can I—[*Interruption.*] A number of my right hon. and hon. Friends are suggesting from a sedentary position that my advice should be to read my right hon. Friend’s summer reading list. However, he has also given me an opportunity to do something that I suspect many on my side may not thank me for, but I am taking a lead from you, Mister Speaker, in saying that I am pleased to be able to see my husband in the Gallery today.

Q11. [912154] **Vernon Coaker** (Gedling) (Lab): I obviously disagree with the Prime Minister on many aspects of policy and the work that she has done over the past few years, both as Prime Minister and as Home Secretary, but it would be wrong not to commend her for the phenomenal work she has done to bring forward the issue of modern slavery and to tackle human trafficking, so I congratulate her on that. However, we still face many issues and challenges. Last year, as part of Government policy, we locked up 507 potential victims of modern slavery as immigration offenders. That cannot be right, and surely we need a change of public policy to treat them as victims, not criminals.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks and also for his work on modern slavery, because he and I have spoken about it on a number of occasions over the years, and he has also been a great champion. We passed the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which took action in relation to individuals who could find themselves on the receiving end of criminal charges effectively because they had been forced to act in a certain way because of modern slavery. We have been looking at how we deal with victims and the referral mechanism. It is important that we have had an independent review of the 2015 Act, which proposed a number of recommendations for improving how victims are treated, and we will be taking most of those recommendations on board.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Further to the mention of modern-day slavery by the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), it is right to record that my right hon. Friend has long and distinguished service

in this House, both in government and in opposition, and her commitment to public service has been outstanding. Her vision and her determination to bring forward legislation against modern-day slavery led the world, and I hope she will continue her fight against slavery with us from the Back Benches so that we stamp out this evil scourge together.

The Prime Minister: I look forward to joining my right hon. Friend on the Back Benches and continuing to campaign on this issue. I also pay tribute to her for the work that she has done on this issue. She is right: it is an absolute scourge. We must continue to fight it, and we must continue to raise awareness of it, because there are too many people today in this country—not trafficked into this country, but British citizens—who find themselves taken into effective slavery. We must raise awareness of this, and we must constantly work to combat it and to end it.

Q12. [912155] **Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has often spoken about the need for an industrial strategy during her time in office, but the St Rollox railway works in Springburn, affectionately known as the Caley, will be closed by its asset-stripping German owner Mutares on Friday, ending 163 years of engineering excellence and the jobs of 200 skilled workers. The Scottish and UK Governments have both failed to intervene to save this strategic site since the closure was announced late last year, while the workforce have been left devastated. Even though the Prime Minister is losing her own job today, it is not too late for her to act now and to instruct the Government to do everything they can to find a way to save these vital jobs and this historic railway works. Will she at least commit to doing that?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the concern that the hon. Gentleman is showing for his constituency, and the worry and concern that there is for those people who are employed in the business that he has referred to. Of course, whenever we see closures of factories and closures of industrial sites, the Government do act to ensure that support is available for those who find themselves losing their jobs, should that be the case.

However, the hon. Gentleman says that I talked of having a modern industrial strategy. We have a modern industrial strategy. It is a modern industrial strategy that is essentially setting the background and the framework that will enable the economy of the United Kingdom to be the economy for the 21st century.

Mr Charles Walker (Bromley) (Con): You are in no doubt, Mr Speaker, that I think the Prime Minister is a thoroughly good egg, and it has been an absolute privilege to serve her on the Back Benches.

This Prime Minister’s commitment to mental health has been simply fantastic; it was fantastic when she was the Home Secretary, and it has been fantastic in her time as Prime Minister. We have had the Stevenson/Farmer review of workplace mental health; Sir Simon Wessely’s review into the Mental Health Act 1983; her commitment to reducing the tragedy of suicide, with her putting her office behind that; and the introduction of places of safety for people experiencing a mental health crisis. We have been filling the Prime Minister’s diary up with

future commitments as she authors the next chapter of her political life, but can she find space for a few more paragraphs on mental health?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I also thank him and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) for the dignified way in which they conducted the Conservative party leadership election. He has been an advocate for the Government doing more on mental health during his time in this House, and he has championed the need for us to do more on mental health. I want to continue to ensure that we do indeed take that forward. We have set the record in putting that record funding into mental health and in having those essential reviews—Stevenson/Farmer and Sir Simon Wessely's review. We now need to ensure that we implement the proposals and that we take this forward. If we do so, we will make a significant improvement in the lives of those people with mental health problems.

Q13. [912156] **Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Professor John Snowden of Royal Hallamshire Hospital has just received a top NHS award for pioneering work on stem cell transplantation for multiple sclerosis sufferers. I declare a personal interest: John Snowden and his excellent team were responsible for my transplant last year for multiple myeloma, a form of blood cancer. Will the right hon. Lady give an assurance, as she steps down as Prime Minister but remains an MP, that she will not support any form of Brexit that prevents John Snowden from continuing to work with his EU colleagues on the board of the European Society for Blood and Marrow Transplantation, which will continue to advance this treatment for patients with myeloma, MS, leukaemia and other conditions?

The Prime Minister: I commend the individual to whom the hon. Gentleman referred for the work that he has been doing. I am not aware of the organisation that the hon. Gentleman referred to, of which the consultant that he mentioned is a member, but I do want a relationship between the United Kingdom and European Union in the future that enables our scientists and academics to continue to work with those in the EU, and around the rest of the world, to do the pioneering work that—as the hon. Gentleman said, speaking from his own experience—is changing people's lives for the better.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Ah yes, a singular denizen of the House: Sir John Hayes.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Prime Minister and I first encountered the “bumping pitch and...blinding light”

of parliamentary life together in 1997, and since then, over many tests, have endured some defeats and enjoyed many victories. As she reflects on her innings on the Front Bench, will she count among her greatest achievements the falling number of workless households, which has succoured personal responsibility, secured family stability and nurtured communal pride? Will she continue that work and, in doing so, unite the whole House in that mission?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for that, and also thank him for all the work that we did together when he was a Home Office Minister. He worked very hard to ensure that what I believe is an extremely important and pioneering piece of legislation, the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, went through this House. I am very happy to welcome the fact that we now have that low number of workless households in this country. We all know that children brought up in a household where there is work are more likely to do better at school, and more likely to succeed further in their life. Reducing the number of workless households is an important aim, and one that I would have hoped could be accepted and championed across this whole House.

Q15. [912158] **Ian Austin** (Dudley North) (Ind): May I start by associating myself completely with the final answer that the Prime Minister gave to the Leader of the Opposition about his need to consider his future? It is absolutely clear to me that the vast majority of Labour MPs agree with her.

Hundreds of people have come to my community meetings in the last few weeks. They are worried about antisocial behaviour, car crime, burglaries and violent crime. They want more police on the streets and more criminals locked up, so will the Prime Minister urge her successor to make sure that West Midlands police gets all the support it needs to keep people in Dudley safe?

The Prime Minister: First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his appointment as trade envoy to Israel. He has done a lot of work on antisemitism, and should be congratulated on it. We have been ensuring that we put more money into police forces: around £1 billion extra is available to police forces this year, and many police forces around the country are recruiting more officers. On the theme with which the hon. Gentleman started his question, I imagine that to him and to others it is a matter of great sadness that the Leader of the Opposition took the Labour party through voting against extra money for the police, and against extra powers for the police.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Some 31 people were killed in Idlib yesterday, and many tens of thousands of people were displaced—again. I thank the Prime Minister for her personal commitment to Syria, and to international development more widely. I would like her to join me in reassuring the people of Syria that all of us here will continue to remember them.

The Prime Minister: First, I commend my hon. Friend's work in setting up Singing for Syrians, which has been raising funds for people in Syria, and the commitment that she has shown to the people of Syria. We remain, and the Conservative Government will remain, committed to working for a political solution in Syria that can provide the stability and security that the people of Syria deserve.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I join others in thanking the Prime Minister for her years of public service as Home Secretary and as the Prime Minister, for the thoroughly decent, dedicated, honourable way she has carried out all her our duties, and for the very courteous and proper way she has dealt with us as a

party. Working together, we have ensured that there actually is a Conservative and Unionist Government of the United Kingdom, which will please many in the House. I will also please Labour Members by saying that we have ensured that there is no early general election.

Now that the Prime Minister has more time on her hands with her dear husband, Philip, I urge her to come to Northern Ireland and avail herself of the many walking opportunities there. She will have seen the wonderful Open championship this weekend in Royal Portrush, which was a credit to Northern Ireland and to the United Kingdom. The warm hospitality of the people of Northern Ireland was on show, and it is open to her as well.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the discussions we have had and the support he has continued to give to the Conservative and Unionist party so that there is a Conservative and Unionist Government in this country. I thank him for the warm invitation to Northern Ireland he has given to me and Philip. I have enjoyed my visits to Northern Ireland. I congratulate all those in Northern Ireland who were involved in putting on the Open championship at Portrush. There was a slight issue with the weather, which may have favoured those who came close to the top of the championship, but it was an excellent championship, and many people will have seen the delights and benefits of Northern Ireland when they attended that event.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): As somebody who has not invariably seen eye-to-eye with the Prime Minister, may I thank her for her remarkable public service, for showing that highest of virtues, a sense of duty and, on top of that, for being willing to deal with enormous courtesy with people who must on occasions have been annoying to her? On behalf of many people, I thank the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Can I say—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Fortunately, because the hon. Gentleman's voice carries, I was able to hear his question, but I am at least as interested to hear the answer

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks. This place is about debate, argument and discussion about the issues that we all believe in so passionately and that matter to us all. Those debates and discussions are best held when they are held with respect and courtesy. I thank my hon. Friend for the courtesy that he has shown to me in our discussions together. I look forward to probably continuing some of those discussions when I join him on the Back Benches.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): When I think of girls growing up in East Dunbartonshire, I know it is inspiring for them to see women in positions of power, whether that is as First Minister of Scotland or as Prime Minister of our United Kingdom. What advice does the Prime Minister have for women throughout the country on how to deal with those men who think they could do a better job but are not prepared to do the actual work?

The Prime Minister: My advice to all women is to be true to yourself, persevere, keep going and be true to the vision that you are working for. I congratulate the hon. Lady on her election as leader of her party. I am pleased that we have a Member representing a Scottish constituency who is a leader of a United Kingdom party. That goes to show that we are one United Kingdom, and MPs from the four nations of our Union sit in this House on the basis of equality. I also congratulate the hon. Lady on becoming the first woman to lead her party. As I stand down, I am pleased to be able to hand the baton on to another female leader of a political party.

As I look around the Chamber, I have to say that we almost have a full set. My party has had two women leaders, the Liberal Democrats now have a woman leader, and the SNP has a woman leader, as does the DUP, Plaid and the Greens. Even—*[Interruption.]* Wait for it. Even the independent TIGger group, Change UK, or whatever they are calling themselves this week, are now on to their second woman leader. There is only one party in this House letting the side down: the Labour party.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for all she has done for women in Parliament and in this country, from co-founding Women2Win to tackling domestic abuse and modern slavery and legislating to make our society more equal. Will she urge her successor to build on her work and make Britain the best place in the world to be a woman?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to urge that commitment for the future. I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. I am very pleased that under my Government, we have seen the gender pay gap at a record low, female employment at a record high and a record percentage of women on executive boards. With our women's empowerment road map, we are now looking at how we can empower women in this country from school to retirement. I want women in this country to feel that there are no limits to how far they can go and what they can do with their lives.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): We have disagreed on many things over the years, but the Prime Minister knows that I have long respected her resilience, commitment to public duty and seriousness, as well as her work on national security. I assure her that there is much to be done from the Back Benches. She knows that I once said to her that I believed she was not the kind of person who would take this country into a chaotic no-deal scenario, not least because of the advice she had had on the risks to our national security. I am fearful about her successor, so can she reassure me that she really thinks, in her heart, that her successor will take those national security warnings as seriously as she has? If he does not, in October, will she speak out?

The Prime Minister: First, I have every confidence that my successor will take all the issues that he needs to look at in making these decisions and others across Government as seriously as they need to be taken. I also say to her—I am sorry, but I will say this—that she is absolutely right that I have always said that I believe it is better for this country to leave with a good deal, and I believe we negotiated a good deal. I voted three times in

this House for a good deal. I spoke to the right hon. Lady about this issue. If she was so concerned about the security aspect of no deal, she should have voted for the deal.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): In every aspect of her public life, the Prime Minister has put her heart and soul into giving people the best chance in life. Without understanding, autistic people and their families, who number 2.8 million in the UK, are all at risk of being isolated and developing mental health problems. In thanking the Prime Minister for all the work she has done in furthering the debate surrounding mental health and removing the stigma, may I ask her whether, after she has left the Front Bench to spend more meaningful time with her husband Philip, she will join the all-party parliamentary group on autism and become a champion and advocate for autistic people throughout the country?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question and for the groundbreaking work she did on the Autism Act 2009. That legislation helped to raise people's awareness of the issues experienced by those on the autistic spectrum and greatly increased our understanding of what we need to do to enable people with autism to lead fulfilling lives. There are many issues in which I want to take an interest when I am on the Back Benches and this, along with mental health more widely, is something that I will want to continue to look at. I have committed to taking the autism training that the all-party group has made available for Members of Parliament.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Finally, I call the Mother of the House, Harriet Harman.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): It is always a historic moment when a Prime Minister leaves office, especially when the country faces such difficult times ahead, as we do, but the right hon. Lady's departure marks another milestone, because although we are on to our 77th Prime Minister now, she is only the second woman ever to have held that office. She made tackling human trafficking and the horrors of domestic violence a priority at the heart of her Government, and in that respect her legacy is secure, because everyone in this House backs that work and we will all be committed to taking it forward.

Even the Prime Minister's harshest critics must recognise her integrity, her commitment to public service and her dedication to this country. Those are qualities that none of us should ever take for granted, but may I offer her a

word of sisterly advice? Sometimes, you just have to be a bit more careful when a man wants to hold your hand. I thank her for her service as our Prime Minister, and I sincerely wish her all the very best for the future.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. and learned Lady for her question. She joined this House in 1982 when there was a female Prime Minister, but there were very few other women in this House. She has played a very important role—one of which she can be proud—in ensuring that more women come into this House as Labour Members of Parliament. She started something that began to change the face of this House, which has been very important. I came here in 1997 as one of only 13 Conservative women—indeed, one Labour Member of Parliament approached me to encourage me to sign a private Member's Bill list because he assumed that, as a woman, I must have been a Labour Member of Parliament. I am also proud to have played my part in getting more women MPs in this House. I am sure that among the women in this House today there is a future Prime Minister—perhaps more than one.

Later today, as I said earlier, I will return to the Back Benches. It will be my first time on the Back Benches in 21 years, so it will be quite a change from standing here at the Dispatch Box. I am told that over the past three years I have answered more than 4,500 questions over 140 hours in this House—more than I might have expected. In future, I look forward to asking the questions. We are, as the right hon. and learned Lady says, living through extraordinary political times. This House of Commons is rightly at the centre of those events, and that is because of the vital link between every single Member of this House and the communities—the commons—that we represent. That is the bedrock of our parliamentary democracy and of our liberty, and each one of us, wherever we sit and whatever we stand for, can take pride in that. That duty to serve my constituents will remain my greatest motivation. [*Applause.*]

Ian Austin: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am always deeply obliged to the hon. Gentleman, whom I have known since we jousting at the University of Essex together, but he was not often in order then and I am sceptical as to whether he will be in order now, for the simple reason that points of order come after urgent questions. I think I speak for the House in saying that we look forward with eager anticipation, bated breath and beads of sweat upon our brow to hear with what pearls of wisdom he intends to favour the Chamber.

Meanwhile, we come to the first of our four urgent questions.

British Steel

1.5 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on the sale of British Steel.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): As hon. Members will recall, I made a statement to the House a few hours after British Steel entered insolvency on 22 May. This was, and still is, an uncertain time for the British Steel workforce, their families and their communities, for the customers and suppliers of the business and for everyone who believes, as I do, in the importance of excellent steelmaking and manufacturing in the UK.

In my statement, I said that, although the independent official receiver is solely responsible for the operation and sale of the British Steel business, I would, both personally and on behalf of the Government, do everything that I possibly could within my powers to help secure a good future for the whole of British Steel's operations.

Following a visit to the Scunthorpe plant the following day and to Skinningrove and Lackenby on Teesside the day after with local MPs, including the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), we formed a British Steel support group to work together immediately and actively to pursue that aim. I chaired the group with the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), which has included British Steel management; trade unions Community, Unite and the GMB; the Mayor of the Tees Valley and the leader of North Lincolnshire Council and their officers; the chairs of the Humber, Greater Lincolnshire and Tees Valley local enterprise partnerships; UK Steel; Make UK, the manufacturers' organisation, on behalf of suppliers and customers; the Federation of Small Businesses; Government officials and other local MPs, including the hon. Lady, my hon. Friends the Members for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) and for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), and the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin). The support group has now met eight times, usually in Doncaster, and sub-groups on the supply chain have met separately, as have local partners.

I wish to pay tribute to the hard work, tenacity and dedication of this group and the extraordinary commitment of the workforce who, during this time, have worked magnificently, not only to continue but to increase steel production.

Often in insolvencies, customer orders dry up, suppliers withdraw their services and the workforce drifts away, precipitating a rapid failure. In this instance, the opposite has been the case. The confidence that the support group has built, coupled with a Government indemnity to the official receiver, has allowed trading to continue, orders to be won and production to increase. This is without precedent in my experience.

Although all decisions are for the official receiver, I have been active, as Members know, in visiting prospective buyers in many parts of the world to make it clear that the UK Government will, within our legal powers, work

with a good long-term owner of these important assets to see how we can help them to realise their vision for the company.

I am pleased to say that the official receiver has said that he is encouraged by the interest in purchasing British Steel and his special managers, EY, are currently in further discussions with potential buyers. The official receiver has made it clear that, given the complex nature of the operations, any potential sale will take time to deliver.

I said in May that I was determined to see the proud record of steelmaking excellence continue. The world needs steel, and British Steel is among the best in the world. To secure that will require, in my experience, the continued active participation of everyone that I mentioned earlier without interruption during the critical weeks ahead. In particular, whoever stands at this Dispatch Box will need to devote themselves unstintingly to achieve a great outcome for everyone concerned with British Steel, which I believe, although not certain, is certainly within grasp, and that is the flourishing of British Steel's operations for many years to come.

Anna Turley: Let me begin by putting on record my thanks to the Secretary of State—not only for his response just now, but for the way in which he has responded to this crisis. We find ourselves in a fundamentally different position from the situation in 2015, where, either by design or flat-footedness, the Government failed to respond, with devastating consequences. This is a completely different scenario, and I am grateful to the Secretary of State for stepping in and helping to secure the asset, enabling the business to continue and ensuring that the workforce were paid. Through the indemnity that the Government have given to the official receiver, the Secretary of State has given us a very good chance of ensuring the future for British Steel in this country. I also thank him for his efforts in going around the world to help secure a buyer.

Of course, the situation remain precarious. In the past few weeks, we have seen the new Prime Minister running around the country waving kippers in the air; by contrast, 5,000 dedicated, highly-skilled workers in British Steel have been putting their shoulders to the wheel in Scunthorpe, Skinningrove and Lackenby, despite their livelihoods being in the balance. They have been producing at record levels and working with every effort they have to ensure that the business continues to produce the best steel in the world and to flourish. I pay tribute to all those working within British Steel. They deserve a Government who will be straining every single sinew to ensure that the business survives.

I pay tribute to the trade unions, including Community and Unite; every worker in British Steel; everybody in the customer base who has continued to ensure that requests for steel have come through, including some who have even stepped up their demands; everyone in the supply chain who has continued to work so hard to supply the business; and colleagues in the Doncaster round-table. I again pay tribute to the Secretary of State for the inclusive and positive way in which he has responded. However, I do have a number of questions for the Secretary of State—for whoever will be at the Dispatch Box in the coming days, weeks and months ahead.

First, does the incoming Secretary of State understand the implications of failure? We know what 5,000 job losses could be like in areas such as Scunthorpe, Redcar

and Skinningrove where there is no alternative employment, and we know the cost of cleaning up the site: £1 billion. Does the future Secretary of State understand the loss of a major industry in Britain that any self-respecting major economy would value and recognise to be essential? Will they recognise the role of steel as a foundation industry for our defence, automotive and construction sectors and what reliance on overseas production could mean for our economy, our independence and our self-reliance?

Secondly, will the future Secretary of State endeavour to ensure that the official receiver continues to receive the indemnity for as long as it takes to find a buyer? Thirdly, will they endeavour to give wholehearted Government support to the bids that primarily keep the business together as one industry across Skinningrove, Lackenby and Scunthorpe? Will they pledge to prevent cherry-picking, to keep asset strippers at bay so that we do not suffer the same issues that we have experienced before and to ensure that the terms and conditions of the workforce are maintained? Will they ensure that any company that the Government support will invest in the assets and ensure that they are modernised for the future of our industry? Will they invest in research and development and be committed to the long-term interests of steelmaking in this country?

Finally, I hope that whoever will be at the Dispatch Box in the weeks ahead will recognise that they have the jobs and livelihoods of thousands of men and women in their hands, as well as the guardianship of a vital, modern, innovative and potentially world-leading British industry.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for asking the question that has given us the chance to talk about these issues. She has been dedicated and devoted to her constituents, as have other Members—starting the week with me in Doncaster with the colleagues I described to ensure that we can work together and join together to ensure that there are no gaps between any of the interested parties. That has had an appreciable effect, as has been noted by many prospective buyers. Certainly, many customers and suppliers have also observed the resolution and the unanimity of resolution behind this.

Many of the hon. Lady's questions were addressed to whoever might be the Secretary of State under the new Prime Minister, so it would be presumptuous of me to answer on his or her behalf, but she has placed a clear set of requirements on the record and I endorse everything she said. Not only would the consequences of the loss of historical assets—hugely important in all the communities she mentions—be unconscionable; there would also be the loss of a substantial opportunity.

The hon. Lady, like me, believes that there is a strong strategic future for the British steel industry. As I said in my previous answer, the world is going to need steel. Through investing in infrastructure, this country has opportunities to make greater use of UK steel. We export much in the way of our scrap steel to other countries. That could be made better use of, both environmentally and in terms of industrial opportunities. If we invest—as we intend to and are doing through the industrial strategy—in the technologies that will make steelmaking cleaner, more efficient and suitable for new uses, there is every reason to think that the UK steel

industry, including British Steel, can be a beacon showing the rest of the world how a modern manufacturing industry can flourish.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): May I associate myself with the priorities outlined by my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley)? This is an opportunity to say a big thank you on behalf of the people of Teesside for all the dedication that the Secretary of State—a son of Teesside—has shown to our steel industry. It has not gone unnoticed locally how much he has gone over and above what might be called the ordinary line of duty to secure a positive outcome to this sale, so I pass on a sincere and lasting thank you.

It would be helpful to get on record what the Secretary of State has been doing to leave no stone unturned in these negotiations. In particular, will he talk about the in-principle willingness potentially to invest alongside a future purchaser?

Greg Clark: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's generous words. He has been assiduous not just in being a member of the support group, but by working in Skinningrove with the customers of British Steel to convey the assurances that are necessary. Buyers will have questions about this extensive and complex set of assets, so it is important—and will continue to be important, especially during the weeks ahead in August—that everyone is available and active in providing the answers to those questions.

Through the industrial strategy, the Government have established programmes to support improvement in energy efficiency, which is very important; to decarbonise industrial clusters, of which steelmaking is a prime example; and to invest in research and development. Through the industrial strategy, we have the biggest increase in R&D in the history of this country. I am making these points to prospective purchasers so that they can see that the environment is a positive one.

It would be wrong for me to comment on the individual bids, as that is legally and strictly a matter for the official receiver, but I have made myself available in this country and overseas to answer questions. I think that I have had more than 25 meetings with bidders, and it has been encouraging—to use the words of the official receiver—that serious bids have been made, but the work must continue to land them and to secure the future.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I do hope that this is not my last exchange with the Secretary of State, but just in case it is, I want to stress my thanks for the amazing Mini Cooper toy that he presented me with last week and to say that he should not worry because there will always be a parking space in my heart for him. We might differ in our approach to many of the structural flaws that our economy faces, but we actually have more in common on most issues than many people would realise, not least on industrial strategy. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) for securing this important update on British Steel.

The Secretary of State shares my opinion that British Steel must be kept as one entity, not splintered off to different buyers who do not have the long-term success of the company at heart. However, there have been

[Rebecca Long Bailey]

reports this week that the Chinese Jingye Group, which was interested in the company as a whole, has pulled out. It was also reported that the deadline for bids has been moved a number of times. Indeed, an email sent from the official receiver is reported to have stated that no deadline has been set to conclude a sale process. Can the Secretary of State confirm how many prospective buyers remain, how many are interested in acquiring the entire the company and what deadlines for the sale have been set? Will he also confirm, as my hon. Friend mentioned earlier, that he will only give his support to bids that support the long-term interests of the company, the workforce, the local community and the steel industry as a whole?

The Secretary of State must recognise that, as Labour has repeatedly stated, action must be taken on electricity prices, business rates, driving investment and, of course, securing a good Brexit deal, because no deal could mean no steel. Will he therefore assure the House that he will be taking steps to ensure that the new Prime Minister urgently takes action on these issues and understands the real importance of the steel industry?

Greg Clark: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for the generosity of her remarks. I have enjoyed my exchanges and meetings with her. I hope the parking space in her heart has a charging point for the electric Mini—that would be very important.

The hon. Lady invites me to comment on the bids and some of the press speculation as to who is bidding and who is not. First, this is a matter for the official receiver, and secondly, I would not want to prejudice any of the bids by commenting. The discussions, in many cases, take place under confidential terms, and it would be wrong to do anything that might disadvantage that. There is often, in situations like this, speculation in the press, and much of it is misplaced. What I can say—the official receiver has said this publicly—is that several bids have been made and he is looking for bids that consider the whole of the operation. I welcome that, as the hon. Lady does.

On long-term commitments, we do have a long-term commitment to manufacturing, and to steel in particular. I mentioned some of the funds that are available in the industrial strategy. Of course, because they would accompany substantial investments, which I hope will be in place, they require a long-term commitment from any prospective buyer.

The hon. Lady is right to raise the question of energy prices and electricity prices. This is not a new phenomenon, and it is not unique to any particular Government. In fact, the biggest increase in industrial electricity prices took place under the previous Government. In the past five years, we have contributed nearly £300 million to energy-intensive industries as a rebate towards those costs. Through the industrial energy efficiency fund that is available in the industrial strategy, we want to reduce further the costs of energy. It is very important that we should do that.

The hon. Lady asks questions about the incoming Prime Minister. I spoke to both candidates during the leadership contest to impress on them what she and I agree is the crucial role of this industry. I know that she, the Under-Secretary—my hon. Friend the Member for

Pendle (Andrew Stephenson)—and other hon. Members have communicated not just with the current Prime Minister but with her potential successors to reinforce the resolution across all parts of the House that this is at the top of the new Prime Minister's agenda.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): A very large number of my constituents work at Scunthorpe. Can the Secretary of State assure me that whatever happens, their welfare is at the forefront of his mind? In an international market that is often manipulated by Governments, notably the Chinese, will he assure me that in this case, to quote Sir Keith Joseph, the market is not enough, and there will be an activist and extremely interventionist approach by the Government to ensure that there is a buyer? Lastly, I have always thought that my right hon. Friend was an outstanding parliamentarian ever since our days on the Public Accounts Committee together, and I wish him well in the reshuffle.

Greg Clark: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend. My training under his expert tutelage on the PAC stood me in good stead for ministerial office, and I am grateful to him for that.

I am encouraged by my right hon. Friend's encouragement to take an activist approach. That is the approach that I have been taking. In my view—and this applies to everyone who has been part of the support group—we let this slip through our fingers if we are not there to make sure that all the questions can be answered, whether through the trade unions, which have been magnificent in this, or through the local authorities, including some of his neighbours in Lincolnshire. Ursula Lidbetter, who leads the Lincolnshire local enterprise partnership, has been very active in the group. I will, in so far as I am still at this Dispatch Box, continue that approach. I am sure that my right hon. Friend's recommendation of an activist approach will sound with some resonance down the corridors of this place and reach the ears of the new Prime Minister, who I hope will follow his sage advice.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is disheartening to hear that this process continues to drag on with no idea how long it will take for a deal to conclude. This UK Government must at last stand up for the steel industry and deliver a sector deal. In today's global world, the uncertainty caused by Brexit is providing businesses with the nudge they need to leave the UK. How many more will leave when it becomes apparent that the new Prime Minister has no plans beyond a no-deal Brexit? Our thoughts are with all those dealing with continued uncertainty—employees, management, unions, and those in the supply chain. What will the Secretary of State, who has shown real commitment to securing the continuation of the British steel plants, do—or, indeed, what will his successor do—in the face of a Brexit that is doing irreparable damage to our manufacturing sector?

Greg Clark: I am grateful for what the hon. Lady said about me personally.

I think it would be more disheartening if this process had concluded, as was the wide expectation eight weeks ago, with what happened in Redcar, as the Redcar mentioned, which was the more or less immediate closure

of the plant. The fact that the process continues, far from being disheartening, is heartening in that there are several bidders that the official receiver and his agents are working with. It is absolutely vital that those discussions should continue for as long as they prove necessary. That is one of the reasons why my first act on the warning of the insolvency was to commit a Government indemnity to allow an orderly process to take place, and I very much hope it will.

I very much agree with the hon. Lady that having a sector deal with the steel sector is highly desirable. All the sector deals—colleagues have heard me launch different sector deals from this Dispatch Box—require investment by the industry and by the Government alongside each other. That is precisely what we want to do in this case. I hope that this will be a catalyst for the investment that allows such a deal to take place.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I, too, thank the Secretary of State for his work on behalf of the very large number of my constituents who work at Scunthorpe. It is because of his actions, and the actions of our Government, that they have continued to be paid throughout this process and that they continue to have the confidence to commit to the British Steel site at Scunthorpe. Moving forward, does he agree that it is really important that the incoming new Government commit once again to big infrastructure projects such as High Speed 2 and, of course, Northern Powerhouse Rail—HS3—to give the industry the certainty into the future that there is going to be investment from this Government in such vital infrastructure?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his participation in the support group in support of his constituents, which has been very valuable. As I made clear, this is for the official receiver, and I do not want to get ahead of his progress. The situation is still not resolved. He has said that it is encouraging, but we need to work very carefully to ensure that it is resolved satisfactorily. In terms of audit, one of the striking things he has found, as my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) and the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) will know, is how loyal customers of British Steel have been, in many cases confirming orders well into the future. Network Rail is one such customer, for two reasons—partly for steel reasons but partly because I believe that we should have big upgrades in our national infrastructure. I very much endorse what my hon. Friend said.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I very much welcome the activist approach that the Secretary of State has taken with regard to British Steel. I also welcome the fact that no deadline has been imposed, because the most important thing is that this time we find a buyer who is going to support British Steel, invest in it and see it through to the future, unlike the previous owner. Will he give an assurance that the Government will stand by British Steel until a new buyer is found? He knows full well that if a steelworks is closed, it is incredibly hard to reopen it. I urge him to look again at a sector deal for the steel sector, which is so important for the whole industry's future. Our Select Committee, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, will be looking specifically at British Steel, but also at the wider steel

industry, in our inquiry in September. We will be looking both at the actions that this Secretary of State has taken, which we welcome, and at those of his successor.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, the Chair of the Select Committee, and I welcome the prospect of that inquiry. There is a lot to examine, and she will approach it with her usual forensic attention to detail. I very much hope that the new Prime Minister will continue the commitment that the current Prime Minister was willing to give and the authority that she has given me to act in the way that I have. She and others will hold to account the new Prime Minister and his team on that.

The hon. Lady is right; there is something special about steel assets in many respects, but one is that if they are closed down, it is very hard for them to spring back into life, so continuity is of great importance. That is one of the achievements that, together, we have been able to bring about over recent weeks.

No one is keener than I am to conclude a sector deal. It requires investment. There is an opportunity for the British steel industry to be more strategic than it has been and, as some other sectors have done, align itself to some of the products that we know will be in demand in the future, backed by research and development. That is the approach that the industrial strategy takes, and it applies in spades to steel, so I hope there will be a sector deal to reflect that.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I am pleased to hear my right hon. Friend acknowledge the world's dependence on steel and the value that he places on British Steel. Does he also recognise that, without coking coal, there would be no steel industry? The privately funded, multimillion-pound Woodhouse colliery being developed by West Cumbria Mining in my constituency is of vital importance and will have economic, social and environmental benefits for our area and, indeed, the country. Will he do all he can to help move that project forward?

Greg Clark: As my hon. Friend says, much steel production requires coking coal, so it needs to be provided. I understand that there was broad cross-party support for the operation that she describes. One of the imperatives is to move steelmaking to be cleaner and greener in its energy efficiency and use of other fuels. That feature of the industrial strategy programme applies very much to the steel industry.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) in thanking the Secretary of State for his approach to the industry in general and this issue in particular. He has reminded us today and on previous occasions that we cannot just turn on and off a steelworks like a tap. If it is allowed to go cold, it is very expensive and difficult to set up again. The indemnity has been the key thing in enabling operations to continue while a buyer is found. What assurance can he give the House that that indemnity will continue for as long as it takes to finish the process of finding a buyer?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman; he knows about the manufacturing industry, and he is right in his description of it. I have to report that my

[Greg Clark]

request for the indemnity was granted readily; I think the lessons of the Redcar closure have been learned. I have no reason to suppose that the incoming Prime Minister will take a different view—in fact, quite the reverse. I have met him and his competitor, and during the days ahead I hope and expect that that support will continue to be available. But I should be clear with the House: British Steel is in the hands of the official receiver. Neither I nor any other Minister determines its future, so it will be important to conclude a sale to a long-term investor in it. That is not in the bag yet, but I think it is evident that everyone is doing everything they can to secure it.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): I was pleased to hear from the Secretary of State that he has been working tirelessly with British Steel and the official receiver to find a new buyer for the company. Can he tell the House what further plans the Government have to support companies in the supply chain, such as those in my constituency, over the coming days and weeks?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, because she gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to Stephen Phipson, the director general of Make UK, the manufacturers' organisation. He serves on the support group and has been present at the meetings, and he has convened a panel of suppliers and customers, to ensure that some of the uncertainty and challenges that they have faced during the insolvency of British Steel have been dealt with. Working with HMRC, the British Business Bank and the official receiver, the panel has had—as I think colleagues on the support group would accept—a positive role in providing help and reassurance to the supply chain across the country.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has acknowledged that the closure of a major steelworks is an intergenerational blight, as we have seen with the closure of Redcar and of Ravenscraig, which is still a wasteland 30 years on. It is therefore critical that we maintain long-term planning in the sector. That is aided by patient finance. Access to patient finance in this country is very poor compared with some of our peer nations, notably Germany. What will he do to improve patient finance access for the huge capital investment needed in the steel industry, in order to improve the attractiveness of British Steel to potential investors?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. Improving the access to and availability of patient capital in this country is a focus through the industrial strategy and some of the work that the Treasury is doing, but there is more work to be done. He is right—a long-term owner of British Steel needs to have the patience required in an industry that is, and always has been, subject to the ups and downs of the economic cycle and sometimes conditions in international trade. It is often not the most stable of industries, and as I think he would agree, any owner needs to be resilient to that.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): British-manufactured steel is vital for exporting companies in my constituency, such as General Electric, and across the country and

therefore makes a huge contribution to our balance of payments. What is being done to support the export of British steel both directly and through other manufactured goods? Will my right hon. Friend comment on what my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) said about the possibility of the UK Government being a co-investor, alongside others, to ensure that British Steel continues to serve this nation so well?

Greg Clark: On the first point, there are great opportunities for exports. The support group has been working with the Construction Products Association, for example, to improve the marketing of British Steel products in this country and to overseas markets. Support is available through UK Export Finance for British exporters in all sectors. When it comes to the requirements of any bidder, strict rules pertain to British Steel, which is one reason why it requires an understanding of the investment plans of prospective bidders. That is something I have been doing, and I hope it will continue in the new Government.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): As the son of a steelworker, may I join the Secretary of State in praising the workforce and the trade unions at British Steel? I want to press him: will the Government ensure that the terms and conditions of the workforce are kept high through this difficult time, until a new buyer emerges?

Greg Clark: The terms and conditions have continued. The special managers, on behalf of the official receiver, have worked closely with the trade unions. Through the support group, we have no complaints and no reason to think that anything in those terms and conditions has been impaired during the insolvency. Of course, when a company is in insolvency, it is in the hands of the official receiver, but the special managers have shown themselves to be understanding and accommodating of the requirements of the workforce. It is a reflection of the workforce that they have committed themselves to the company and increased production at a time of uncertainty. That is a real tribute to their professionalism and the faith they have in the quality of their product.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I know from friends and colleagues in the trade unions, particularly Community, that they are thankful for the positive approach the Secretary of State has taken to his dealings with this. I am glad that Doncaster is providing the venue for talks, and everybody who is a party to them is welcome to come to my house for beer and sandwiches—or whatever they fancy—if it helps the talks in any way.

The Secretary of State has mentioned securing a steel sector deal a couple of times, and he alluded to one of the issues that the industry should think about. Does he still believe that getting those talks under way again at the earliest possible opportunity is crucial, and what other main headline issues need to be sorted, discussed or broached to get those talks up and running at the earliest opportunity?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady, and it has been good to meet in Doncaster. It may seem a surprising place to meet, but it is quite convenient for

both Scunthorpe and Teesside, as well as London, so that is where we start our week. The invitation to go to the right hon. Lady's house is a very inviting one, which I am sure the support group will want to take up.

On the sector deal, we have made good progress, but all sector deals are about investment. It has been a feature of the steel industry in recent years that the investment in the future has not been at the level of some other industries where we have concluded deals—life sciences, automotive, aerospace and others. It is not in any sense that the talks have broken down; it requires investments to be made. I hope that, if there is to be a successful resolution for British Steel, that might provide the ability to do precisely that.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that what the steel industry, including in the Black Country, needs above all else is a long-term strategy, with a pipeline of projects that can create good opportunities for those who work in the sector?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is right, and he is right, as his neighbour the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) did, to call attention to the role of the Black Country. They have a phrase in the Black Country, “Made in the Black Country, sold around the world”, and that is a proud and accurate boast. However, there are opportunities in the UK for those products, and the Government have published a forward pipeline of infrastructure investments that require steel so that companies can gear themselves up to participate in procurement.

That is very important, and I would like to pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), who has responsibility for industry. He has signed the steel charter and is promoting it across all public bodies. Again, it requires and encourages the use of British steel to be taken into account in all procurement decisions.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Following on from the Secretary of State's answer, he may recall the Defence Secretary saying that

“we can and must buy British.”

Does he agree that one way to do this would be to back a British bid to build the Navy's new support ships, which could create 16,000 jobs throughout the supply chain in Barnsley and across the country?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady makes a good point. We have published figures for each Department on their use of British steel. It is the case, and the House should be aware of this, that not all types of steel used are actually made in the UK. At least at the moment, it is not possible to supply all of our steel needs from domestic supplies; that is the reality. She mentioned the MOD, and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State is working closely with the Ministry of Defence so that its support for the steel charter results in increasing levels of procurement of British steel.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (LD): We can be incredibly proud of our steel industry. It is of course a primary example of where industrial activism generally, on the part of the Government, is absolutely vital. If we see

any form of Brexit, which the Secretary of State knows I oppose, it will of course be even more important that we have industrial activism. I am in no way agitating for his removal, but will he assure this House that if he is replaced in post in the next 24 hours, he will urge any successor not to turn their back on implementing a proper industrial strategy? Now is certainly not the time for a return to the Thatcherite economics that, frankly, saw the destruction of so many great industries in this country.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he has said. He and other hon. Members will know that the approach we took to developing the industrial strategy was to seek, I think successfully, to engage all parts of the country, all parts of the economy, and different firms, business leaders, local leaders and trade unions, to have something that reflects, as far as possible, a shared view of what our priorities should be in the future—whether that is investing in infrastructure, investing in skills, increasing the research and development investments that we make in this country, and identifying opportunities, such as in the future of mobility or the analysis of data, that are great sources of global opportunity for Britain. We did it in that way because I think it is right for an industrial strategy to endure—a short-term strategy is a contradiction in terms. I hope the consensual way in which it has been put together and the content of it will commend the industrial strategy to the incoming Government. It is obvious from what the hon. Gentleman has said that he will play a role from his seat in ensuring that those in government do that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): As chair of the all-party manufacturing group of MPs, may I remind the Secretary of State, whom I have a lot of time for, that it is essential we have steel in this country? I represent Huddersfield, which is a major engineering community, and the community is at the heart of this. Manufacturing, steel and engineering all hang closely together. Will he take a long-term view, but will he also make sure that we do not sell at the weakest time in the market? If the steel industry needed a period of public ownership, what would be wrong with that? This pragmatic Government have done it with London North Eastern Railway, so why not with steel? May I urge him to be totally pragmatic, not ideological, and to make sure that we have a steel industry that is successful in the future?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman and I share a view about the importance of steel and manufacturing. At the University of Huddersfield, the national rail testing facility is a very important part of our contribution to increasing standards of technological development, so he is absolutely right. When it comes to the steel industry, the key thing is having an owner that, in my view, is willing and has an ambition to invest for the future. Since the official receiver is encouraged by the level of interest, what we in the support group—I would observe that it is a pragmatic group of people—want to do is to support those bidders to make sure that we have the long-term future we all want.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): It is important strategically and for regional employment to maintain a steel industry in the United Kingdom, and I do welcome

[Sammy Wilson]

the efforts that the Secretary of State has made to date. However, does he not realise that high-cost renewable energy plans and costly decarbonisation policies—pursued by this Government and previous Administrations, who, quite frankly, have pandered to a Luddite green lobby in this country—have resulted in energy-intensive industries moving out of Britain, with the aluminium industry being an example? These issues will have to be addressed if we are to maintain a viable steel industry in the United Kingdom in the future.

Greg Clark: My experience from conversations with the bidders for British Steel is that there is a recognition in the steel industry—not just in this country, but around the world—that the move to cleaner and greener production is happening globally. Actually, there is an opportunity to get ahead of that, as investing in improved energy efficiency and reducing carbon emissions will have to be done everywhere. Again, one of the purposes of the industrial strategy is to advance ourselves as a place where this has been done well and reliably and has been well supported. That, it seems to me, is best for the long-term future of steel making and other manufacturing, rather than attaching ourselves to a model that will be increasingly costly around the world. The future depends on being more energy efficient and greener.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The UK exports 2.6 million tonnes of steel to the European Union every year. It is estimated that a no-deal Brexit would add £70 million of additional administration costs and costs relating to border checks. Does the Secretary of State therefore agree that a no-deal Brexit represents an existential threat to the British steel industry, and will he be conveying that message loud and clear to his successor and to the incoming Prime Minister?

Greg Clark: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that that message should be conveyed to all Members of the House who did not vote for a deal that would have provided, as British steel advised, the ability to trade in that way. My views on the desirability—in fact, the imperative—of having a good deal that allows us to trade without introducing barriers and frictions are well known to the House, and indeed beyond. What I will say is that at this time, when potential purchasers are considering British steel, actually it is not the case that the steel industry would not have a future in the event of different forms of Brexit. It is very important to convey to prospective buyers the fact that the industry that exists, with its opportunities domestically and internationally, and with the quality of its workforce and of its steel production, is attractive in itself and will not be trumped by the Brexit settlement. It is important that those prospective buyers have confidence, as some of them have having done their due diligence, that this is a good investment in all circumstances.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): May I first thank my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) for her advocacy in the Chamber and—those of us who also

know her as a friend know this—for her tireless activism on behalf of the steel sector, which has no better advocate? I also thank the Secretary of State; in a time of upheaval on the Government Front Bench, I hope that one point of consistency will be his position there. He has explained in the past, and in many appearances here in the Chamber, that the steel sector does not quite fit the criteria for a sector deal. Does that mean that we need to look at how the sector deals themselves are operating, to see whether they could be tailored to support such a vital industry?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. It is not that the sector deals do not fit at all; it is that that would require investment on behalf of the industry, the players in the sector, and in recent years that investment in the future has not been as readily available or forthcoming as it has been in other industries. I hope that will change. I have a big appetite to invest alongside the sector, as we do in others, so there is absolutely no question but that it is available, and I hope that we will be able to conclude one very quickly.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State's work and lament the likelihood that he will not be there to see the deal through and a foundation industry saved, alongside many jobs, many of which are in my constituency. When he leaves a little note for his successor, will he show his true Teesside-born credentials and just tell them that they must do all they can to get the deal across the line, and that they must not fail?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman seems to have powers of prediction that are certainly beyond me. I think that *Hansard* this afternoon will provide the little note—perhaps an extensive note—that he has in mind.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The prize for patience and perseverance goes to Jonathan Edwards.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Madam Deputy Speaker. In February this year the EU put in place a definitive safeguard strategy on steel imports, covering 26 steel product categories. It put in place a 25% tariff once the quota has been surpassed. What analysis have the British Government undertaken of the impact on the UK steel sector of leaving the EU customs union, in terms of exports to our biggest market and imports to the UK?

Greg Clark: We have been very clear in the discussions that have been taken prospectively. Obviously, the arrangements are not settled until the Brexit conclusions are settled, but we have been very clear in a number of product areas that safeguards should be available and should be used for precisely the purpose they have been so far and will be needed in future.

Draft Historical Abuse Bill (Northern Ireland)

1.55 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the updated draft Bill on historical abuse, and when the legislation will be brought before Parliament.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): The historical institutional abuse inquiry looked into the abuse of children under 18 who lived in institutions in Northern Ireland between 1922 and 1995. The Hart report was published in January 2017 and recommended a commissioner for victims of abuse and a redress scheme for victims.

This is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland and, as such, is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly. However, in the absence of Northern Ireland Ministers, the Northern Ireland civil service launched a public consultation on draft legislation, which closed in March this year. The results of the consultation were provided to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in May. Those results were different from the Hart report in some, but not all, areas, so the Secretary of State asked the Northern Ireland political parties to help resolve them. They did that, and I would like to put on the record our thanks on behalf of not just the Government, but victims, their families and all those who responded to the consultation.

The head of the civil service in Northern Ireland provided the Secretary of State with a redrafted Bill late last week. I am happy to confirm that it would establish a commissioner for survivors of institutional abuse in Northern Ireland and a redress scheme, which reflects a cross-party political consensus on the changes recommended following the consultation. That said, I hope that everyone here will understand that, given that the draft arrived only a few days ago, we will not be able to introduce it by tomorrow, but I am sure that everyone here is extremely keen to move forward on this—there is widespread support for action right across the community in Northern Ireland. I am also happy to reconfirm the commitment, made last week in the House of Lords, that in the absence of a sitting Assembly in Stormont, the Government will introduce primary legislation before the end of the year to set up a scheme.

None of us can undo what was done in the past, but I hope that, by getting a scheme under way, as I have laid out here today, we can at least provide some level of support, and perhaps a little closure, for the victims and their families.

Ian Paisley: I thank the Minister of State for that answer. I also pay tribute to Judge Hart, whom he mentioned, who recently passed away.

Last night I took a heartbreaking call from Marty Adams of the Survivors Together group. On Friday I took a call from Gerard McCann, another survivor of abuse. Last month the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) and I met a group of survivors in Belfast and their legal representatives. In the past couple of weeks the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has collectively met a delegation of survivors and victims. These campaign teams are run on a shoestring. The entitlement of these

victims is well established, as the Minister of State has now made clear. Indeed, the head of the Northern Ireland civil service has removed every impediment to allow these compensation payments to be made.

Last week, in a day and a half, this Parliament was able to rush through major changes to laws in Northern Ireland that are extremely controversial, and they were waved and cheered on by a packed House, and many of those Members on the Opposition Benches are notable today by their absence. This issue unites political parties—I pay tribute to the shadow Secretary of State, who personally telephoned me and did all he could to ensure that this matter would be raised today—yet still there appears to be this delay.

I do not doubt the sincerity of the Minister of State, the Secretary of State or indeed the team working on this in the Northern Ireland Office, but there can be no further delay. There is nothing to prevent the legislation being introduced this evening and voted on tomorrow and the matter being resolved before we go into recess. If the will is there, it can be done. Will the Minister affirm that there is not one comma outstanding and not jot or tittle out of place in the legislation—that it is ready to go and will be expedited?

John Penrose: I join the hon. Gentleman in his tribute to Sir Anthony Hart. In the past couple of weeks, during the passage of the Bill that he mentioned, tributes were paid to Sir Anthony for his contribution. Sadly he is no longer with us, but I hope he will be looking down and cheering on the progress of the legislation we are talking about today.

The hon. Gentleman is also right to say that the issue unites political parties not just here but in Northern Ireland. I mentioned in my earlier remarks that there have been efforts to get cross-party consensus on the updates to the legislation. He is also right that what happened to what was supposed to be a three-clause Bill is incredibly frustrating. He and others in his party and I at the time all pointed out that it turned into a Christmas tree—I think that was the phrase everyone was using—with other issues added to it. I know that he would therefore not have wanted that Bill to be added to still further.

This important issue has not yet been properly debated in a legislature. It will need primary legislation to be taken through. It is something that is new and it needs to be dealt with carefully. I am afraid that I therefore cannot tell the hon. Gentleman that the Bill is ready to go today. As I said, it arrived with us a couple of days ago. It is being gone through in huge detail. There are also all sorts of supporting documents, explanatory memorandums and so on and so forth that need to be put together. That is being done at pace—I can promise him that—but it will need to be taken forward by the incoming Administration. It may be the two incumbents or others sitting in the Northern Ireland Office who do that, but I do not think there is any shortage of good will, energy or cross-party agreement to take the legislation forward. I therefore hope that we will be able to introduce the legislation at pace and at the very latest by the end of this year.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What estimate has the Minister made of the possibility of meeting the substantial financial costs of the measure by having recourse to the sometimes quite wealthy institutions that perpetrated the abuse in the first place?

John Penrose: The draft legislation that has been sent to us does not go into that level of detail about what might be pursued. What is clear is that in order to ensure that financial probity is maintained, the costs of the scheme will be met from the Northern Ireland block grant. That is important, because the measure should be done, as I mentioned at the start of my remarks, by the devolved Assembly spending the money it is in charge of. It therefore has to be money that the Assembly has control of, and we all obviously hope that it will be back up and running as fast as possible to exercise that control.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I place it on record that I am not a prophet—the Prime Minister has not given me any indication of what the Northern Ireland team will look like—but I thank the Secretary of State and the Minister for their courtesy in our mutual dealings. That said, it is now more than two years since Sir Anthony Hart's report was made available, and virtually seven years since the Historical Institutional Abuse Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 began going through the Northern Ireland Assembly. Since the Hart inquiry report, 40 of the survivors we are aware of have died. They are people for whom there will never be justice, but even for the existing survivors, every day that goes by is not justice delayed, but injustice continued. I therefore strongly support the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) in his plea for real urgency.

It may be that the House cannot see the Bill in the next two days, but we will come back in September. It seems a perfectly reasonable request to see the Bill on the Floor of the House then. As the Opposition, we will expedite this and we will work with the Government and Back-Bench MPs to ensure that the Bill's passage is as quick and efficient as possible, but I have one specific request for the Minister. Can he think seriously about whether in the interim it would be possible to give some down payments, almost, of compensation to survivors as evidence of good faith and of real intent that we will at last give some sense of justice to the survivors of things that should simply never have been allowed to happen?

John Penrose: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments about the Secretary of State and me, but also for the further evidence of the cross-party support and the shared sense of urgency and determination to move forward as promptly as we can with the legislation. That is welcome, and it increases the chances that under the new regime, whoever is in it and however it will be formulated, we will be able to continue the momentum that has only recently developed.

The hon. Gentleman is also right to say that there is a huge sense of frustration, mainly brought about by the fact that the Hart report came out just as the Northern Ireland Assembly ceased sitting. Something that I suspect would normally have been taken forward promptly by MLAs and the Executive there was therefore not taken forward with anything like the same degree of urgency, because they were not there to do so and the matter is properly devolved. Everyone here will have heard the hon. Gentleman's kind offer, and I hope that that will make any potential imagined obstacles to introducing legislation during the course of this autumn that much lower in the minds of the business managers when we come back in due course later on this year.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Can I just say I find it unacceptable that we are even thinking the legislation should be done by the end of the year? It should be done immediately. Given that David Sterling redrafted the legislation last week, it could have been tabled and introduced this week. It is unacceptable that that has not happened, but a commitment for that to happen the first week we return should be on the table. Significant periods between the 1920s and the 1990s were under direct rule, so while the issue is a devolved matter, does the Minister not agree that this place has a responsibility to give compensation to those victims? Does the Minister not further agree that, given that this place has previously passed all stages of Northern Ireland legislation in 24 hours, this Bill should be the top priority when we return from summer recess?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the Secretary of State.

John Penrose: I am the Minister of State.

Hon. Members: Promotion!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I must make it absolutely clear that I have no crystal ball. I was merely aware of the stature of the hon. Gentleman and was mistaken. I call the Minister.

John Penrose: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will briefly respond to my hon. Friend by saying that I think she is tempting me into what is probably a constitutional impropriety by trying to commit the incoming Government, whoever may be in it, and bind their hands. The comments made by her, the shadow Secretary of State and Members from all parts of the House will have created a helpful political fact, which is that there is clearly a great degree of cross-party consensus about the legislation—not only here, but among the parties in Northern Ireland—and a shared cross-party consensus about pace and urgency too. I am sure that message will be heard loud and clear by the business managers, whoever they may be.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I have to say clearly to the Government Minister that the dithering, procrastination and excuses around the delays in compensating the victims of historical institutional abuse in Northern Ireland have been absolutely shameful. The dithering must stop. Three months ago, the head of the Northern Ireland civil service, David Sterling, said that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland had a moral responsibility to compensate the victims of historical institutional abuse if the Assembly was not up and running by the end of the summer. He was absolutely right: the Government have a moral responsibility to legislate for the issue. I think it would be fitting for the Minister to take a few minutes to explain to the victims of historical institutional abuse, 30 of whom have died in the three years since the Hart report—thank goodness we had someone of the stature of the late Sir Anthony Hart to do that inquiry—the wasted three months since the comments by the head of the Northern Ireland civil service.

John Penrose: The hon. Lady is rightly giving vent to people's frustrations. She and many people on both sides of the House, including me, feel exactly the same way, as do many of the victims' groups. I make the point that I made in my opening remarks: when the results of

the consultation came out, they were different in some detailed, but very important respects from the initial Hart recommendations. It was important to make sure that we had a solid basis of reconciliation between those proposals and the original Hart report proposals, and to make sure that there genuinely was cross-party agreement. That process is difficult and took some time, but I think that we are there now. It seems, therefore, that we have something with which we can go forward. It would be slower if we did not have cross-party consensus, so it has been sensible to take the time to get there. I agree—I think everybody here is in violent agreement—that now we are there, there are very few obstacles to moving forward at pace, and I think everybody wants to do so.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I wish my hon. Friend and the Secretary of State all the best for the discussions that will happen later today or tomorrow. If we stick to the timetable that gets the Bill through by the end of the year, will he confirm when he thinks payments can start being made to the victims?

John Penrose: I am afraid I cannot give my hon. Friend a precise date. The Bill will have to make its way through Parliament—through this Chamber and the one at the other end of the corridor—and there will be clarity at that point about when the payments scheme should be able to start making payments. I suspect that the appetite for a leisurely process will be very thin. I expect that people will want to crack on with this and it is right that we should want to. We would therefore want to start making preparations as soon as the civil servants constitutionally can—as soon as the direction that Parliament will go is clear—and at that point, we can start doing the preparations at an early stage, as I am sure everybody will want them to.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Minister alluded to the reasons why the legislation cannot proceed today or tomorrow. Setting that to one side, will he give an undertaking that the legislation will be placed before the House on the first day back in September—we have only two weeks back here then—that payments will be made as soon as possible thereafter, and that the period between now and then will be usefully used to see what institutions will pay where the abuse occurred?

John Penrose: I would love to be able to make the commitments exactly as the hon. Gentleman asks, but I am afraid that I cannot, simply because—as I said in response to earlier questions about tempting me into a constitutional impropriety—doing so would bind the hands of the incoming, new Administration. It is clear, however, that there is widespread appetite to move fast on this. This is an important issue, but of course it is not the only important one—Brexit is looming, and so on—so other things will be making bids for parliamentary time as well. However, Members on the Treasury Bench will have heard the widespread support for prompt movement. I therefore hope that the comments from the hon. Gentleman and others will have struck home.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Abuse of children, including sexual abuse of children, is always despicable, wherever it occurs. Many of the cases in Northern

Ireland were particularly horrific. Victims deserve care and compensation, but is this not yet another example of why it is so important that the devolved Government can get back up and running in Northern Ireland? Will work to do that continue over the summer period?

John Penrose: I devoutly hope so. The talks have been ongoing—until last night—and I devoutly hope that they will continue. There is a sense of commitment and determination, but there is still further to go. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out that had there been a Stormont Assembly, most people here would have expected the MLAs in the Assembly and the Executive to have sorted this out long since, given the horrific nature of the abuse that she rightly pointed out, and that that urgency would therefore have resulted in answers and a redress scheme well before now. That is a good example of why getting the Assembly back up and running is so important.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response today and add my voice strongly to the calls for the Bill to be moved forward as swiftly as possible. There is deep frustration about how this matter has been handled over the last number of years. When we look at such processes all over the world—particularly involving redress—we see that there is a significant contribution from the institutions that are found to have liability. That issue has been raised here. There is concern that those conversations have not yet commenced with the institutions, as far as I am aware. A significant number of the bodies mentioned in the report are non-governmental organisations. Will the Minister outline what he is intending to do? All parties and the all-party group on this matter agreed that this process should commence as soon as possible and that there must be a contribution from the other institutions to help to support victims.

John Penrose: I understand the concern around this matter. Given the need to move this process at speed, we have mainly been focusing on getting the commissioner and the redress scheme outline legislation in-house, and we are going through it at speed now. At the moment, therefore, that issue has not been at the front of priorities. I take the point that it will need to be addressed, but perhaps I can write to the hon. Lady to confirm how we might take that forward. I do not want to make any commitments on what might be the right answer for that at this stage, but I hear the concerns that she and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) raised. This clearly needs to be thought through.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response and his clear commitment. Will he outline how he believes compensation will in practice be available for victims and the proposed timeline for the Bill's passage and implementation? Is September the date that this will happen? Further, will the Bill enable those who have reluctantly accepted small compensation sums to be able retrospectively to access and receive compensation that truly reflects the horrific abuse that they were subjected to historically?

John Penrose: Let me take that second and crucial point first. The draft Bill, as it has been sent to us, does allow for people who have already received initial compensation payments from other sources—whatever

[John Penrose]

they may be—to apply to the scheme. That is certainly in the scheme proposals as they have come to us. I think that that has cross-party support from the Northern Ireland parties, so I can confirm that that is—as I suspect the hon. Gentleman has been briefed and told—exactly what it says.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his responses and my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) for raising this urgent question. The Minister will have heard the sense of frustration that we all have around the delay in this process and our earnest desire to find a solution quickly for victims. I am very conscious that Kincora boys' home was on a site 400 yards from my constituency office and many of those abused were in its care. The Minister specifically mentioned those who were abused in Northern Ireland. Will he confirm that the proposals being brought forward will include children who were born and entered care in Northern Ireland and were then forced emigrants, passed out to care institutions as far away as Australia, and abused both at home and abroad?

John Penrose: I think that the answer to the hon. Gentleman's detailed and precise question is yes, but if it is not, I will write to him to put the record straight. However, having followed the train of logic, I think that the answer is yes.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): Regarding the time delay, I appreciate that two and a half years ago, this report was submitted to the then Northern Ireland Assembly, which was brought down by Sinn Féin. My hon. Friend the Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) alluded to the delay and pointed out that many have passed away while waiting. We are rubbing salt into the wound. It is imperative that we get this Bill across the line as soon as possible. I ask for a commitment that it will be brought back in the first week of September, as a major point of business—as a priority—to get this issue resolved.

John Penrose: I completely sympathise with the hon. Gentleman. He is not the only person to have made that point this afternoon, and I doubt he will be the only person across the communities of Northern Ireland to make it either. There is huge urgency and impatience about this. As I said, I cannot bind the hands of my successors, but I am reassured that the urgency and importance that everyone here attaches to the subject will come across loud and clear to whoever the business managers may be. There are other important issues on the political horizon—he does not need me to tell him that—but that message will come across loud and clear, and I thank him for helping to drive the message home.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I was serving in the Northern Ireland Executive when this issue first came to their attention, and two things were very clear in our discussions. First, perpetrators of abuse should be held culpable for that abuse and for compensation. I hope that over the summer the Minister will have discussions with the civil service in Northern Ireland to ensure that the discussions about contributions from those named in the Hart report can commence. Secondly, any money made available should be made available to those who have suffered; it should not be absorbed by huge legal bills, as often happens in such cases. If that is not explicit in the legislation, I hope that before it comes before the House in September the Minister will ensure that the will of the Executive in that regard is also reflected.

John Penrose: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that where any criminal liability is implied, it will rightly be an independent prosecutorial decision taken not by politicians but by investigators in the correct, normal way at arm's length from Executives of any kind. He made a parallel but equivalent point about potential compensation contributions that has been made by others on both sides of the House. I want to reflect further on that to make sure I hear the concerns on both sides of the House. Clearly, this will need to be considered carefully.

Feltham A Young Offenders Institution

2.22 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will make a statement on Her Majesty's chief inspector of prison's recent invoking of the urgent notification process for Feltham A young offenders institution.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): At the outset, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke), who I gather has recently tendered his resignation as Secretary of State for Justice. I hope that you will allow me to answer in his place, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) for tabling this urgent question and for the opportunity to respond on an important subject. I am also grateful to Her Majesty's inspectorate of prisons for its work and the scrutiny its inspections provide. I take the safety of all the young people in our custody very seriously, and clearly the urgent notification letter for Feltham A does not make comfortable reading. It is clearly a deeply disappointing and concerning report. Despite the significant efforts of staff at Feltham A, to whom I pay tribute, and the significant support and resources put in by the youth custody service and the Ministry of Justice, it is clear that serious underlying challenges remain. I have been clear that progress to address these issues needs to be swifter to deliver the safe environment that we all wish to see and that, as recent reports acknowledge, we do see in other parts of the youth custodial estate.

In addition to work already under way, we have taken a series of immediate steps, including placing an immediate temporary stop on new placements of young people into Feltham A, alongside additional resources and support for staff. The governor is still relatively new in post and is working hard to drive improvements in an establishment that has one of the highest and most concentrated proportions of violent offenders in the country. She and her team are dedicated to turning Feltham A around, and we will continue to support them in doing that. As required by the urgent notification process, we will formally respond with an action plan within the required 28 days.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the Minister for his response and for notifying me of the letter yesterday.

Feltham young offenders institution was a prison left without a governor for five months last year, and the findings of the recently announced inspection have been distressing for the staff and all those involved with Feltham. There was talk of a dramatic decline in safety, which is a matter of great concern for us all. I extend my thanks to the POA trade union and the staff and management, who have been working at that prison in very difficult circumstances.

The problems at Feltham are long standing and the current situation should have been avoidable. The Government have much to answer for regarding why the decline has been so fast, with a steep rise in violence against staff, allegations of assault and levels of self-harm.

The Government desperately need to get to grip with the causes of the rapid decline and to support the staff and inmates in turning the situation around. Given that we are talking about children—140 boys aged 15 to 17 are being held at Feltham A in the care of the state—will the Minister update us on why Feltham was left without a governor for five months last year, what the impact has been, and what assessment he has made of the root causes of the steep decline in performance?

The Minister says he has supplied resources, but why does he believe they have not been sufficient? What additional skilled resources does he intend to provide to support the staff and management to address the culture and behaviour management issues that are so significant? What support is there for those young people living in great distress at Feltham young offenders institution? How fit for purpose does he consider Feltham to be, how quickly does he plan to produce his action plan, and how will he keep Parliament and me informed, particularly over the recess?

Edward Argar: I am as ever grateful to the hon. Lady. As she mentioned, I spoke to her yesterday, and we met again this morning. I am grateful for her typically measured tone, not seeking to score points but focusing on what needs to be done to improve the outcomes for young people at Feltham. I know her constituents will be grateful to her as well.

The hon. Lady raised a number of issues that I will address in turn. Her first point was about the gap—the interregnum—between governors. She is right that there was a gap. The previous governor was promoted to a prison group director role and the recruitment process took longer than anyone would have wished. One of the key reasons was that the governor, who has now been appointed, had to serve a notice period in her previous role. The view taken was that she was the right governor to do this job and that therefore it was appropriate to wait. She served her notice and is now in post. I emphasise that I have confidence in her. I believe that she and her team are doing a difficult job very well, as the hon. Lady alluded to. I recognise the constructive and positive relationship between the local branch of the POA and the governor and her team, and I thank them in the same way.

On the root causes, there are a number of challenges at Feltham. As I said, it has a very high concentration of very violent and challenging young people. At present, I believe, there are 110 young offenders in Feltham A, which has an operational capacity of 180. There is, therefore, significant headroom to give the staff greater opportunity to tackle the violence and the underlying challenges faced by those young people. The hon. Lady will be aware, because we met to discuss it earlier in the year, of the violence in April and of the incidents of assaults on other prisoners and on staff. There were a large number of incidents of self-harm and violence but a small number of perpetrators. We have some very challenging individuals.

The hon. Lady was right to mention resources and the need for skilled resource. There has been a 31% uplift in the budget for Feltham A, with £3.5 million going in, and it has an opportunity to draw down further moneys from a second £5 million pot across the youth custodial estate. There are also 90 more staff across Feltham. The experience mix and band mix are

[Edward Argar]

broadly the same as they have been over time, but the hon. Lady was right to allude to the importance of experienced staff. We are bringing in extra senior and mid-level experienced resource to help drive change, both at the top level and to support those staff. I believe that seven senior staff have already been seconded, and there will be further changes in the coming days. Andrew Dickinson, the governor of Wetherby, is also taking on a role in supporting Emily, the prison governor. It will be a mentoring role, but he will also play a key role in monitoring the action plan. His institution got a good inspection report and we want to learn the lessons from that.

The hon. Lady raised two other points, which I will address swiftly. On fitness for purpose, current Government policy is to move away from the existing youth offender institution model and towards a secure schools model. Like the Minister who spoke before me at this Dispatch Box, I will not bind a future Government, but that is the current policy. In terms of keeping this House updated, I anticipate that the action plan will be ready within 28 days. I or my successor will write to the hon. Lady and the shadow Secretary of State when it is ready, so that they are kept informed, and we will continue to keep the hon. Lady, as the local Member of Parliament, informed throughout the action plan process.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I was glad to hear the Minister refer to the good report for Wetherby, but may I press him further on what is being done with an equally difficult cohort of individuals at Wetherby? What is Wetherby doing right that Feltham has been doing wrong?

Edward Argar: I will focus on what Wetherby has been doing right, as highlighted in the recent report. The governor of Wetherby is doing a lot of work to ensure that his staff and new recruits get not only up-front training but continuous training over a 12-month period, which makes a real difference to them. It has a strong and effective regime and the governor is focused on continued access to that regime; that is hugely important. The Keppel unit also does very important work in helping some of the most challenging people in the prison to tackle the underlying causes of their trauma, offending and behaviour. I believe we have a lot to learn from Wetherby and that Andrew Dickinson will help the governor of Feltham in playing a key role in making progress.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Two years ago we stood here for an urgent question on the crisis in our prisons after the chief inspector warned that not a single establishment inspected was safe to hold children and young people. Does the Minister accept that the chief inspector issuing an urgent notification for the first time in the youth estate highlights how the Government are overseeing a dangerous collapse in safety for children in custody, and that that shows, unfortunately, how little the Government have done in those two years?

The general prison crisis is bad enough, but we are talking about children—children in dangerously unsafe conditions. The chief inspector warns that in Feltham the

“speed of this decline has been extraordinary”,

violent incidents are up by 45% since January 2019, and self-harm has increased fourteenfold in two years. When was the Minister first aware that the situation was spiralling out of control? What has been done since then? Will he agree to report to this House before seeking to end the temporary ban on children being sent to Feltham?

Later today we will get yet another Justice Secretary—the fifth I will have faced in just three years. I am sorry to say that I am sick of the warm words, sick of the speeches giving the impression that something is being done, and sick of the media stunts that serve as a springboard for leadership bids. Does the Minister agree that the chaotic approach to leadership in the Ministry of Justice deepens the crisis caused by unacceptable prison cuts? Finally, does he agree that whoever takes over as Justice Secretary must go beyond empty rhetoric and finally make the safety of young people in custody an urgent priority?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his contribution, if not for his tone. This may be the first time I have faced him directly across the Dispatch Box for an urgent question, and it might also be the last time—who knows? He asked a number of specific questions. He will be aware that, following his comments in 2017, the chief inspector said subsequently that it is no longer the case that there is no safe institution. It is important to draw that to the attention of the House and to mention again the Wetherby report. It is clear that this is not a systemic problem in the youth custodial system. That said, none of that, as the hon. Gentleman rightly says, detracts from the fact that what has been reported from Feltham is a cause of deep concern and must be addressed as a matter of priority.

Since my appointment last summer, I have been following the performance of Feltham and, indeed, all the other youth custodial institutions in my portfolio. I have held a number of meetings both with the governor and with the director of youth custody service, to discuss progress in Feltham and what more needs to be done. As I have made clear, considerable additional resource has been put in, so this is not a matter of spending or resource, and a considerable number of additional staff have been put in, so it is not down to that, either. It is important that we put that on the record rather than indulge in rhetoric about cuts, which do not apply in this case. The smile on the hon. Gentleman's face suggests that I have a point. I continue to take a very close interest in the issue, particularly in recent months, and I have engaged with the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) and kept her up to date.

The hon. Gentleman asked when the temporary ban on placements will be brought to an end and how the House will be involved. That is an operational decision to be made by the director of the youth custody service. I am not able to bind my potential successor to how that is handled, but I am sure that whoever stands at this Dispatch Box with that responsibility will wish to keep the hon. Lady and, indeed, the House informed on that important issue.

The hon. Gentleman concluded with comments about leadership at the Ministry of Justice and the number of Secretaries of State and Ministers. I have to say that his characterisation of how the Ministry of Justice works certainly does not accord with my experience of working

there every day. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke), who has recently departed the role of Secretary of State for Justice. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the number of Ministers, but I suspect that their departure and the churn rate has little to do with his performance as their shadow and rather more with other factors. This Government and whoever leads the Ministry of Justice are entirely clear in their view that we must do everything we can to ensure that any children detained in custody are accorded care and support of the highest quality and are safe.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Why are young men locked up in their cells for the greater part of the day, with all the pent-up frustration that that gives rise to, when they should enter their cells with relief at the end of the day because they are so knackered, having been involved in vigorous activity?

Edward Argar: My right hon. Friend makes his point in his own unique way. Access to a full regime is important. Young people in custody need access to sporting, educational and other facilities. There is more we can do to address that need in Feltham, although I am encouraged by a lot of the work being done there, on sport in particular. I visited four weeks ago and saw “boats not bars”, which is about using rowing machines in the gym, and the work that Saracens rugby club is doing. A whole range of sporting and other activities are undertaken at the prison, but my right hon. Friend is right to highlight that there is always more that can be done.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I visited Feltham with the Justice Committee earlier this year, and I am saddened, although not wholly surprised, by the inspection report. According to the report, self-harm has risen by 218% in the past two years, assaults on staff are up 150% and 40% of children said they felt unsafe during their time in Feltham. There is clearly a rising epidemic of violence at Feltham, and no child should be left in these conditions. I have heard what the Minister said, but what specific and urgent steps will he now take to rectify this situation?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady is right, and I spoke to the Chairman of the Justice Committee this morning to discuss his visits, the Committee's work and the urgent notification. The hon. Lady is right to highlight the violence and self-harm. I would sound a slight note of caution—it is only a slight one—on the incidences of self-harm; it is also important that we look at the number of individuals involved, because some individuals might be prolific self-harmers who account for a very large number of incidents, so there will be a small number of individuals. That is in no way to detract from its significance, but it is important that we are clear about that.

The hon. Lady asks about specific steps that are being taken. First, as I have made clear, we have placed a temporary block on the further placement of young people in Feltham; its capacity is 180, but about 110 young people are there at present, so there is room within Feltham for the staff to stabilise the situation and work on improving matters. The second step has been an urgent review of cell buttons—call buttons. That was

highlighted in the report; it may appear to be a small issue, but it is extremely important that when someone buzzes for help or they need help that call is answered, so we have undertaken a review to check that the buttons are working effectively.

As I have also said, additional senior level resource is already going in, to bring additional experienced resource in, but also to support the governor in delivering on the action plan and driving forward rapid improvements. Andrew Dickinson, the governor of Wetherby, will be playing a key role in that; we have seen the positive inspection report he got at Wetherby and it is important that we draw on those lessons to work with the very able governor we have in Feltham.

In terms of the buildings, a programme is already under way for works to improve showers and other facilities, and I have asked the director of the youth custody service to undertake a review of the overall state of the estate there, to identify if any capital or other works are urgently needed.

Finally, we need to ensure that, as swiftly as we can, we address the challenges the chief inspector highlighted on how particular policies were applied, especially the keep-apart policy; while that has an important role to play in tackling gang-related or other violence, it must not lead to a curtailment of the regime and the active regime, which can play a key part in keeping young people active and keeping a lid on tensions and violence.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Notwithstanding the context my hon. Friend has set out, the high levels of self-harm at Feltham are particularly concerning. What is he doing to improve the mental health of young offenders?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of mental health, and healthcare more broadly, for offenders and particularly young people. The levels of self-harm are deeply concerning, and we need to do more to drive them down. More broadly, we are seeking to have better liaison and diversion services, which divert those who genuinely have a mental health need and, where that can be better treated in the community, to have that option. We are also working on our health and justice plan, which is about improving the mental health and physical healthcare pathways for all those who enter custody.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank my fellow Hounslow MP my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) for asking this question today. I visited Feltham as the Hounslow lead member for children's services in around 2003, not long after another murder there. The Howard League has today re-released its July 2018 report on Feltham. For 30 years, there have been critical inspections of the regime at Feltham and nothing has got any better over those 30 years. Does the Minister not agree that to lock up in a prison environment 15, 16 and 17-year-olds, who are children, is fundamentally wrong? We are the only equivalent country that does this. Yes, some of them have committed terrible crimes, but they are children with mental health problems or addiction problems, or they may be neurodiverse or have learning disabilities.

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

Should we not learn from other countries and provide a better therapeutic regime to support these children to turn their lives around?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady takes a keen interest in this issue, not just as a local MP but from formerly serving on the Justice Committee, and she highlights the important point that a large number of the young people—female offenders and others—who end up in custody are victims as well as perpetrators of crime and that, as well as justice taking its course, we must make sure that the help they need is available to them, whether mental health help or a range of other interventions, to tackle the underlying trauma. We have seen in the past 10 years roughly a 70% reduction in the number of under-18s being sentenced to custody—the figure is down to about 700 at the moment—so liaison and diversion work. However, it is right that the courts still have the option of sentencing to custody, especially for very serious assaults, violent offences and sexual offences, but the current Government's approach to this policy is to move towards secure schools: moving away from essentially a prison with some education to an environment that is a school with a degree of security, which is necessary given the nature of some of the sentences and some of the crimes committed. So we are seeking to address this with a cultural change in how we approach dealing with young people who commit these crimes.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): A significant proportion of the young people who find themselves in these institutions will have had experience of the care system, so does the Minister agree that councils and the Government should do more as corporate parents to prevent those children from ending up in the institutions in the first place?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend, who comes to this with a considerable degree of knowledge from his previous roles before he was a Member of this House, is absolutely right. A large number of the young people who end up in custody have been in care or in contact previously with the social care services of local councils. Our youth offending teams within councils do an extremely good job, and I recently visited Lewisham's team who do an exceptional job and I pay tribute to them for their work. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of local authorities taking their corporate parenting role seriously. When I was a councillor before I was a Member of this place, we had an approach in which each councillor became a corporate parent receiving anonymised reports on individual looked-after children to better understand the responsibilities all local authorities and councils have in this respect, and I would recommend taking that level of interest.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The all-party group on the prevention of adverse childhood experiences can state without any doubt that young people who experience adverse childhood experiences are much more likely to end up in prison. Does the Minister agree that many more of our organisations and services need to be trauma-informed, so this does not just start with the Prison Service once young people are in custody but starts much earlier? We might or might not see the

Minister again at the Dispatch Box, but will he drive this agenda within his own party because we need many more trauma-informed services across the board?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who I know takes a close interest in this area. Who knows what the announcements in the next day or two will bring, but I assure her that, regardless of them, I will continue in whatever capacity to take a very close interest in it. She is right about trauma-informed services: often by the time a young person ends up in custody in one of the YOIs or secure training centres that I am responsible for, it is almost as though they have got to the end of their relationship with the state; they will have been through a long process and had relationships with many state bodies on the way and each of them will potentially have failed them, resulting in their getting to that point. It is absolutely right that a trauma-informed approach is adopted throughout the voluntary and state systems, so that we do everything we can to address the underlying trauma suffered by those young people and to help them break the cycle of offending and have an opportunity for a productive and positive life.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): At Chelmsford Prison, we have also had a high level of violence and some tragic suicides, but when I have spoken to staff recently, they have told me how the situation has improved for a number of reasons: reducing the number of prisoners; more staff; more training for staff; investing in equipment to identify and stop drugs; and investing in improved environments to make the prison a less horrific place to be. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must ensure that the new Justice Secretary has whatever resources they need to ensure that our prison staff can be safe and that violence can be reduced?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is a strong champion for Chelmsford Prison. I believe that she has visited it on almost a dozen occasions, and I know that the staff there are grateful for the close interest she takes. She will forgive me if I am not at this point tempted into making spending announcements—especially in the absence of a Chancellor of the Exchequer at the moment—but I think both sides of the House would agree that it is important that our prison officers and others who work in our prisons in the custodial estate have the support and the tools they need to do their job effectively.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I understand that the suicide rate for boys aged 15 to 17 in custody is about 18 times greater than the rate for their counterparts in the community. Why is that?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman highlights an important point that links in with points made by other hon. Members—namely, that those in the cohort of young people in custody are not only the perpetrators of serious crimes but often the victims of crime who in many cases suffer from mental health challenges or a range of other issues. If we overlay that with the constraints of a custodial environment, that is extremely challenging, which is why we are working hard to divert young people and others, where appropriate, away from custody into community sentences and towards the support and medical support they need. Within custody, we are

working to improve conditions and ensure that the support is there to drive down the self-harm and suicide rates, but it is also vital that we remain focused on the longer term and on the current Government's approach to changing the nature of youth custody, where it does have to occur, and moving towards a secure schools model.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The problems at Feltham are nothing new—as my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) said, young men were being transferred to Wormwood Scrubs for their own safety or the safety of others 10 years ago—but this is on a completely different scale. The situation has escalated far more quickly, whether in relation to the rise in assaults or to privation, particularly the time spent in the cell. When that was perceived as a problem more generally, the previous Prisons Minister set up the 10 prisons project, which involved regular and active engagement between the Minister and the institutions concerned, and it had an effect. I know that we are short of Ministers at the moment, but will the hon. Gentleman look at that and see whether he or his colleagues can take some responsibility, because this is on another level? People who read these reports regularly will not have seen one as shocking as this for some time.

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to mention the 10 prisons project. It involves the adult male estate and is tackling other issues, but we are seeking to learn lessons from it that could be applied to the youth custodial estate as well. Where something works well in that context, it is absolutely right that we should look at it. He is also right to talk about the importance of direct and personal engagement by the Minister and the director of the service in turning round challenged institutions. I hope that I have sufficiently alluded to that fact in references to meetings with the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston and to my regular meetings with the director of the youth custody service, which are almost fortnightly at the moment. I am taking a personal interest in the operation of Feltham, and indeed the whole estate, and I also speak regularly to the governor herself. She leads a dedicated team who are working in difficult circumstances involving violence and self-harm. I have confidence in her and her team, and they know that as long as I am the Minister, I will do everything I can to support them. I am also sure that the Ministry of Justice will continue to do everything it can support her and her team.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the Minister for answering his first urgent question.

TOEIC: Overseas Students

2.54 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will announce his decisions on the cases of overseas students falsely accused of cheating in ETS TOEIC—test of English for international communication—English language tests.

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Five years ago, “Panorama” uncovered the shocking scale of fraud within the English language testing system. ETS, the company that ran the centres, analysed all the tests taken in the UK between 2011 and 2014—more than 58,000 in all. It identified more than 33,000 invalid results where, in its view, there was direct evidence that somebody had cheated, and a further 22,000 were considered questionable because of irregularities. This fraud was serious and systematic, and 25 people who were involved have been convicted and sentenced to more than 70 years in prison. Further criminal investigations are ongoing, with a further 14 due in court next month. These crimes did not happen in isolation. The student visa system we inherited in 2010 was wide open to abuse. The National Audit Office found that as many as 50,000 people may have fraudulently entered the UK to work using the tier 4 student route in 2009-10 alone.

Following the revelations, the Home Office took prompt action against some of those who were found to have cheated, and that action was endorsed by the courts. Those whose results were questionable were offered the chance to resit the test. Despite this, there are understandable concerns that some people who did not cheat might have been caught up, and that some have found it hard to challenge the accusations against them. So earlier this year my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary commissioned advice from officials. Yesterday he lodged a written ministerial statement updating the House on our next steps. He announced that the Department would change existing guidance to ensure that the belief that a deception had taken place was balanced against other factors, which would normally lead to leave being granted, especially where children are involved.

Furthermore, we will ensure that no further action is taken in cases where there is no evidence that an ETS certificate was used in an immigration application. We will also drop the automatic requirement to interview those linked to a questionable certificate. We continue to look at other options, including whether there is a need for those who feel they have been wronged to be able to ask for their case to be reviewed. It is right that we show concern for those who have chosen to study or make a life in this country, but we cannot allow our concern to undermine the action we must take to tackle what was a widespread criminal fraud. We will keep the House fully informed as our response to this issue develops.

Stephen Timms: By 2017, more than 35,000 refusal, curtailment and removal decisions had been made in ETS alleged cheating cases. Thousands of those accused and denied visas remain in the UK protesting their innocence. The Home Secretary, who I am delighted to see in his place, told the House three months ago:

[Stephen Timms]

"We had a further meeting to make some final decisions just last week".—[*Official Report*, 1 April 2019; Vol. 657, c. 799.]

However, there has still been no announcement. He said on Monday last week:

"I am planning to come to the House with a statement to say much more before the summer recess."—[*Official Report*, 15 July 2019; Vol. 663, c. 586.]

He has come to the House today, but we have not heard that statement. Thousands of students who have been falsely accused now face grave hardship and need this to be resolved urgently.

ETS's records are confused, incomplete and often plain wrong. The professor of digital forensics at Birmingham City University told the all-party parliamentary group on TOEIC last month that it was "unsafe for anyone to rely upon computer files created by ETS...as a sole means of making a decision",

but those files are the only basis for the cheating allegations. Appeals were not allowed in the UK, but a growing number have convinced a court that they did not cheat. Immigration judge Lucas, dismissing the Home Office's case of TOEIC cheating against one of my constituents, wrote last month that

"the reality is that there is no specific evidence in relation to this Appellant at all."

This is a grave injustice that must be brought to an end.

At the Home Affairs Committee on Monday, the Home Secretary suggested a new reconsideration system for TOEIC cases, although yesterday's inadequate written statement did not even go as far as that. Does the Minister envisage a reconsideration system for those wrongly accused? When will it be set up? How will it operate? When will full details of it be announced? Would it not be better and easier just to allow students to take another secure English language test, and if they pass, to allow them to regain their visa status?

Caroline Nokes: I commend the right hon. Gentleman for his diligence in pursuing this issue. He certainly brought it to my attention very early on in my tenure as Immigration Minister. It is important to reflect on the fact that the courts have said, in separate cases, that the evidence was enough to take the action that we did and that people had cheated for a variety of reasons. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary did indeed publish a written ministerial statement yesterday, which gave an indication of the changes so far, but it is important that we continue to work on the issue and find a mechanism to allow people, where necessary, to have some form of review. Unfortunately, I cannot set things out in the detail that the right hon. Gentleman has requested at this time, but I reassure him that I am conscious that we have a new Prime Minister and, should I remain in this post, I will seek to raise the TOEIC issue with him as a matter of urgency, because it is important that we work as a Government to ensure that we find a mechanism for redress for the few cases in which a wrong decision may have been made.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for securing this urgent question and making a powerful case. His work and commitment on this issue has been tremendous. The TOEIC scandal is another

example of the Government's hostile environment, plunging thousands of lives into uncertainty. This shameful episode, which started in 2014, has led to thousands of students being accused of cheating and the cancellation of some 35,000 student visas. Multiple organisations and court cases have questioned the allegations, uncovering the Home Office's many shortcomings.

The damage, distress and loss caused to the international students wrongly accused of cheating has been colossal, leaving them feeling like criminals. Likewise, it has damaged our international reputation as a preferred destination for international students. It is evident that the Home Office has not learned key lessons from this debacle and the hostile environment policy, which is obviously still in play. I met students in Parliament and was shocked to learn about the abuse that they have experienced and to learn that they all suffer mental health problems—something not to be taken lightly.

The Home Secretary revealed at Monday's Home Affairs Committee meeting that a new reconsideration system will be introduced, but the details remained vague in yesterday's statement. The urgency of this matter must be understood, and the Government must clarify what the new system will look like and when it will be set up. These students have endured serious hardship and deserve answers, and immigration policies and processes must be fair and transparent. Will the Minister confirm that no further students accused of cheating in a TOEIC test will be detained or forcibly removed? Does she also accept that students have faced serious financial losses? If so, what financial support will be provided? This grave injustice must be corrected as quickly as possible.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions, but I point out to him that, far from this being a shameful scandal, what is shameful is that this was cheating on an industrial scale. The latest National Audit Office report confirmed that abuse of the system was widespread, and the 2012 NAO report indicated that "abuse was rife". Of course, the Home Office also not only sought compensation from ETS, but received it. It is therefore absolutely imperative that we emphasise that this was criminal activity and that people have been imprisoned. As I said earlier, 14 more individuals are facing court action as a result.

The hon. Gentleman will be well aware of the responses that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary recently gave to the Home Affairs Select Committee, and I want to emphasise his precise words. He spoke of

"a very small number, judging by the cases that have gone through the courts or come to the Home Office since 2014. Nevertheless, even if it is one individual who has been wronged, it is our duty to make sure that we are doing more to help."

It is our duty, and that is absolutely what my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary intends to do.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Yet again, I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and his colleagues on the all-party group for their tireless work on the behalf of probably thousands of innocent people whose lives and aspirations have been ruined by this fiasco. The Minister is absolutely right that shameful cheating was going on but, as the National Audit Office

said, the Home Office should have been just as robust about protecting the innocent as it was in pursuing the fraudsters.

It was positive on Monday that the Home Secretary talked about creating a new opportunity for those who have been wronged to have their cases reconsidered, so it is slightly alarming that the Government seem to have moved away from that approach in the past couple of days. He was wrong to talk on Monday as though the burden of proof should still be on those facing allegations of cheating, who should be presumed innocent until proven otherwise. Thanks to the work of the all-party parliamentary group, we know that assertions of cheating by ETS cannot be relied upon on their own in deciding whether someone is guilty, and the courts have frequently rejected the evidence of ETS, just as they have sometimes upheld it.

I was going to ask when the new mechanism will be up and running, but when will we at least have clarity about whether we are getting such a mechanism? If we are to have a new mechanism, will the Minister undertake that individuals will be presumed innocent unless there is significant evidence beyond a simple and unreliable assertion of cheating by ETS? Finally, to restore credibility and trust in the whole process, will the Minister consider giving responsibility for making decisions on such cases to an independent decision maker—people with the required technical and legal expertise—totally outside the orbit of the Home Office and the ETS?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. I remind him that in 2014, before his time in this House, it was Parliament that insisted that the Home Office took urgent action to address what had been revealed as widespread cheating. It is important to find a mechanism that provides redress for those who may have been wrongly caught up in this. However, the independent expert, Professor French, indicated when he studied the matter that the likelihood of a false match from the voice checks was likely to be less than 1%.

The hon. Gentleman referred to some of the subsequent court cases, and evidence of an article 8 claim of a right to respect for family or private life led the courts to take a balanced decision in many cases that it was right that individuals should be allowed to stay, and that is absolutely what we are saying in the review of the guidance. We want to ensure that the Home Office, which I absolutely believe is the appropriate place for these decisions to be made, is making sensible decisions that properly balance any belief that deception was practiced against the wider circumstances. Where the circumstances are particularly compelling, perhaps when children are involved, it is important that we look to see what more the Home Office can do to help people put their claims forward.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): People accused and defamed, detained and deported, visas lost and people left destitute on unsafe allegations on discredited evidence. Yes, there were cheats—nobody is denying that—but many more were innocent. Maybe the reason why so few such cases have become apparent is that most people were not allowed to appeal and very few have been able to get to court. However, some of those who got to court, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) said, have had justices making public statements on their behalf.

I note the Minister's reassurance, and it is welcome that this matter will remain one of her priorities if reappointed. For that reason alone, I hope she is reappointed, because many Opposition Members have invested a lot of time in this Front-Bench team taking things forward. However, this question will remain for whoever is on the Treasury Bench: when will those not guilty of any offence receive justice?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman—I think—for his kind words in saying that he hoped I would be reappointed. However, I reiterate that the allegations were not unsafe and that our approach to taking action on students has been endorsed by the courts, which have consistently found that the Home Office's evidence was enough to prompt the action that was taken at the time. I emphasise that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary published a written ministerial statement yesterday and made it clear in his appearance before the Home Affairs Committee that he is determined to find solutions going forward that are practical for those involved and provide people with the opportunity to explain, potentially through article 8, how they can substantiate their claim to life in the UK.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): The truth remains that the Home Office does not actually know how many people were cheating. The truth remains that 35,000 people had their visas revoked as part of the Home Office and the Government's anti-immigration atmosphere and hostile environment. That is the truth. Lots of people gave evidence to the Home Affairs Committee, of which I am a former member, and the truth is that the concerns that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) raised are absolutely valid. People have lost their livelihoods. They cannot return home because of the shame and the stigma. They have no recourse to public funds to defend themselves. They have been labelled guilty and as cheats. That is a crying shame, and I absolutely disagree with the Minister when she says this is not a shameful episode. We have had Windrush and the whole hostile environment, and TOEIC is exactly the same thing. Given that the evidence is no longer secure, is it not right that we should not deport anybody else and not force through any more deportations from our detention centres of students who have found themselves the victims of the incompetence of our Home Office and Government?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady was not here in 2014 and perhaps does not remember the pressure from Parliament to address this systematic cheating. I remind her that there have been criminal convictions, with sentences amounting to over 70 years and with more criminal trials to come. It is important to remember that this was a criminal operation on an industrial scale—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Lady may chunter at me from a sedentary position, but she must remember the criminal facts behind this. However, as my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has indicated, we have recognised that some people may have innocently been caught up in it. As he said, it is our duty to make sure there is a redress mechanism for those for whom those circumstances prevailed. However, it is quite wrong to suggest that this is something to do with the hostile environment; this was to do with crime.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Let me help the Minister maybe. If she is absolutely confident about what she is saying from the Dispatch Box—I have to say I would be very surprised if she is—can she commit to covering the legal costs of any student who has had to pay for legal representation as a result of Home Office inadequacy? Surely that must be applicable and appropriate for those who win their appeals.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady will know that when it comes to court hearings, judges will decide whether people have a valid claim to remain in the UK. We continue to look at all the options, including whether there is a need for those who feel they have been wronged to be able to ask for their case to be reviewed. As I have said, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary intends to make further announcements in due course. However, it is right to reflect on the fact that this is a complicated issue, and it is right that we take time to make sure we get it right—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Lady may chunter at me from a sedentary position, but it is important that we make the right decisions and do not just give blanket promises that we will allow people to stay and will pay their costs, when it may be the case that they have cheated.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The problem is that we are no further on. Although I acknowledge the time the Home Secretary and the Immigration Minister have given to meeting Members, no remedy is being offered to people—people into the whites of whose eyes we have to look in our surgeries—who had no reason whatever to cheat, given their written communication and English language speaking skills. I cannot go back to constituents such as Maruf Ahmed and tell them that we face the prospect possibly of a new Home Secretary and a new Immigration Minister looking at this afresh, and certainly of no action at all until the summer has passed. These people's lives are being left in limbo.

Acknowledging what the Minister has said about there clearly having been some cheating, and acknowledging what other Members have said about some people clearly having been inadvertently and wrongly caught up in this, surely the best thing to do now, given the passage of time and the numbers of people involved, is just to let those people sit a secure English language test afresh to give them the opportunity to clear their names, and, if they cannot, to politely ask them to return to where they came from.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that this evidence of cheating came to light in 2014, and evidence of people's ability to speak English now may have no relation to their ability to speak English back then, given that we are five years on. However, I absolutely refute his accusation that we are no further forward. The written ministerial statement yesterday made it absolutely clear that the Home Secretary has asked officials to review Home Office guidance. The reviewing of that guidance relates to article 8 human rights claims to ensure that we make sensible decisions that are properly balanced in terms of any belief that deception was practised and of the individual's wider circumstances. Where there are particularly compelling circumstances, we will also look at whether there is more we can do to help people put forward their claim. Given that this cheating was exposed in 2014, it is absolutely evident

that people's circumstances will have changed; they may well have established families in this country, and those children will have a right to an education here. We must put the priority of the families first. It is right that we should seek a mechanism to support people through an article 8 claim so that they can stay, when there are grounds for them to do so.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for his work on the APPG on TOEIC, which has exposed so much of what has happened. Many people, including some of my constituents, have been left in limbo. They have faced huge financial costs, and I ask the Minister whether it is possible to look at a compensation scheme for those affected and wrongly accused, because their lives have been ruined. Will she also work with higher and further education institutions to ensure that those who were falsely accused can get back to their studies and get their lives back on track?

Caroline Nokes: It is worth reflecting on the fact that many of those caught up in this attended a very small selection of colleges, which have subsequently been shut down. There were very close links between colleges being found to be operating outside their licences and these accusations of cheating. However, I must reflect on the fact that there were over 30,000 cases where there was absolute evidence that people had cheated. There were also 22,000 cases where there were questionable results. All those people were given the opportunity to resit a test. However, it is important to reflect on what my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said in his statement yesterday: we are looking at the other issues and particularly at whether we can give people who maintain their innocence another opportunity to challenge the finding of deception. However, the independent expert found that the likelihood of false matches was very small indeed and likely to be less than 1%.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister's reference to understandable concerns, and I get the sense that she will want to see this issue concluded as quickly as possible. I have been contacted by at least six constituents who are unable to work and support their families as a result of the alleged cheating in TOEIC. They have lost their visas and been threatened with deportation, and their children's education has been put at risk. They have not had the chance to prove their innocence. Their lives are on hold, and their families are under great strain. They are living in limbo. How reassured should my constituents feel by the Minister's statement that they will be able very soon to get the chance to clear their name and, indeed, to get justice for what they have been through?

Caroline Nokes: As I have said, those with questionable tests were given the chance to resit the test at the time. We are clearly stating that the route via an article 8 claim to a family life is one that we wish to enable people to pursue, and they should make another claim. Obviously, I cannot stand here and comment on individual cases, but we are giving people the opportunity to make an article 8 claim, and I hope that that provides a mechanism going forward.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I am afraid that I disagree with the Minister, and agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz

Shah) that this is part of the hostile environment: 35,000 people did not cheat. We do not know how many did, but a large number of people did not, and these are the people who are coming to our constituency surgeries to seek justice. I have met some who have the higher-level IELTS—international English language testing system—qualification, which shows that they have a higher level of English literacy and speech than is needed for the TOEIC qualification, so there is no way they were cheats.

I received an email a couple of years ago from a constituent who had almost completed three years of his degree at London South Bank University, and was not allowed to complete it because of the TOEIC situation. When he applied to complete it, the university would not let him because too much time had elapsed. This situation applies to many. They have paid a fortune in fees and livings costs to be here. What recompense will the Government give those who can definitely be proven not to have cheated? They should be given an opportunity for a further test. Will the Minister, whoever that person is, meet the high commissioners from the countries in which the most people are affected, to try to sort out something positive from this mess, for the sake of the people affected and their families, and for the reputation of this country?

Caroline Nokes: I remind the hon. Lady of the numbers: 33,663 UK tests were invalid and a further 22,476 were questionable, so we are talking about 55,000 tests. The independent expert who carried out the review found that the likelihood of false matches was less than 1%. As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said, where individuals have wrongly been accused of cheating, it is important that they be allowed to find a means of redress, but it is absolutely not the case that this is part of a hostile environment. These numbers are part of systematic criminal fraud.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for securing this urgent question following the work that we on the APPG on TOEIC have done. I know how frustrating the process is for the innocent victims inadvertently caught up in this. Professor French's statement that false matches were less than 1% has been quoted, but he told the APPG just last month that that statement was valid only

"if the results that ETS had given the Home Office were correct", and that information is seriously in question. We need to look at that again. People need to be brought out of limbo. They have waited for the Home Secretary's statement to the House, which did not come; we have had 306 words tucked away in a written statement. We need to know when that limbo will end for them.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman will know that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary did not "tuck away" 306 words in a written ministerial statement; it was published yesterday. My right hon. Friend said that he would update the House before recess, and he has. He has also been very clear that we want to go further. That is absolutely a priority for me and my right hon. Friend, or indeed whoever our successors may be. We will take this up as a matter of urgency with the new Prime Minister.

Point of Order

3.22 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is very rare for this House to find a named individual in contempt of Parliament, and to agree unanimously to admonish them. It would surely be a disgrace for Dominic Cummings to be rewarded, despite being found in contempt, with a post as senior adviser to the incoming Prime Minister. In opening the debate on the motion to admonish on 2 April, the Government stated that they had

"full respect for the privileges of the House of Commons and will continue to uphold them. They are crucial to the independence of Parliament and the strength of our democracy."—[*Official Report*, 2 April 2019; Vol. 657, c. 942.]

Together with the Chair of the Committee of Privileges, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), who unfortunately had to leave for another engagement, I seek your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, on whether the appointment of Mr Cummings would undermine that commitment to respect the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order, and for her courtesy in giving me notice of it. She will know very well that the appointment of persons to official positions at Downing Street or elsewhere is not a matter that can be addressed by the Chair, but resolutions of this House are a matter of concern to the Chair. I can confirm that the House passed a resolution on 2 April that said, in terms, that Mr Cummings

"committed a contempt both by his refusal to obey"

a

"Committee's order to attend it and by his subsequent refusal to obey the House's Order of 7 June 2018"—[*Official Report*, 2 April 2019; Vol. 657, c. 941.]

and the House therefore formally admonished him for his conduct.

The hon. Lady has drawn this important matter to the attention of the House and, indeed, the Government, and although I can give her no further help at this moment, I am quite sure that she will find a way of pursuing her concerns. Not least, the matter is in her own hands when she chairs the Liaison Committee. I am quite sure that she will find a way of taking this matter forward, which would be quite proper.

Dockless Bicycles (Regulation)

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

3.25 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to give powers to local authorities to regulate dockless bicycle-sharing schemes; and for connected purposes.

The sudden emergence of dockless bike schemes over the last few years has been a tale for our times—a tale of the power of tech to facilitate sharing, and of the massive and cheap production of bikes in China. It has led to new opportunities for travel in our cities, but also the prospect of people waking up to find their streets littered with bikes, with no obvious way of dealing with the issue.

I have been urging the Government to act on this for years, because my city of Cambridge was early to experience the phenomenon. Micro-mobility is a potentially exciting opportunity, and data-driven services are set to change the way we travel, but we cannot let the companies who provide these services litter our towns and cities, because, as ever, it falls to our local councils to pick up the mess—and too often the bill. In London in just the last few weeks, London councils have used byelaws to tackle the problem in the absence of help and support from this place; that help and support is the purpose of this Bill.

Let me start with the good examples—there are some—because proper regulation will foster positive innovation. For instance, healthy living can be championed; I am told that in Cardiff, the bike-share service provider nextbike is working with Cardiff Council and local health bodies to enable GPs to prescribe to patients unlimited free 30-minute hires of their 650 bikes. Cardiff Council has stated that it is

“fortunate and proud to offer this opportunity”.

Other examples of initiatives include Bikeshare4all, which tackles digital exclusion and helps those without smartphones or bank accounts to access these schemes.

Dockless bicycle-sharing schemes are just part of a host of new innovations that look set to change the way we travel locally, with on-demand services linked up by tech, such as electric scooters and car-pooling apps. I shall briefly set out the current problems and then describe the ways in which the Bill and regulation could mitigate them, but first, in passing, I should point out that the concerns about electric scooters, made very real by the tragic death of Emily Hartridge, show why we need a Department for Transport that responds much more swiftly to changing circumstances. As a member of the Transport Committee, I see all too often that under this Administration, it really is the Department not for transport but for failing to keep up. I do not blame the Department; I am afraid the fault lies in lack of leadership.

The striking pictures of the dockless bike graveyards around the world that we saw in the newspapers a few years ago show how quickly the schemes can come and go. That was certainly felt keenly in Cambridge, and on an even larger scale in cities such as Sheffield, Norwich,

Oxford and London. Ofo put some 2,000 bikes into Sheffield last year, causing much initial excitement among residents, but six months later they had all been removed.

In Cambridge, I had direct experience of Ofo, which was one of the first movers. Frankly, at the beginning it was very hard to find who to speak to—the bikes had turned up but it was unclear who was running the scheme—and the company’s initial relationship with the council was strained. After management changes, Ofo did engage knowledgeable local people—I visited its premises—and for a while the service seemed sustainable and effective. Sadly, Ofo began to withdraw operations from some areas of the city that it found problematic. I remember seeing an Ofo bike parked on top of a bus shelter in King’s Hedges Road. Suddenly, another operator, Mobike, appeared, adding to the confusion—and to the clutter. Just as suddenly, Ofo was gone, although not all the bikes were gone; some were still around, in various states of disrepair, and in some cases were still being used, but all too often they had been seized and broken by a small number of Cambridge youngsters who were up to no good. Frankly, it has not been a happy experience overall.

Not only do events such as those I have described prevent bike-share schemes from being a real transport solution that people can rely on, but the ending of schemes really disadvantages those who changed their routines to take advantage of the service and made the modal shift that so many in this place are keen to encourage. What message does it send when we exhort people to ditch their car and switch to public transport and bikes, but they then find the service withdrawn just a few months later?

What should be done? Franchising, with local authorities agreeing a timeframe for service provision, could rectify the situation and allow users certainty when they make decisions about their transport options. Currently, a provider can set up a scheme without permission from, or even communication with, the local authority. Franchising would also allow oversight and local authority influence over prices, so that they cannot be hiked overnight, as has unfortunately happened in some parts of the country.

As I have mentioned, bike-share schemes can organise their services to prioritise the most profitable areas and exclude deprived postcodes. I have heard stories that in Manchester one scheme continued to narrow its operational area to squeeze out the highest revenue possible. Regulation would mean that councils could agree the areas that the bikes would serve, making sure they are available in all parts of the city that need the service, not simply the most lucrative. Sustainable transport solutions cannot be a postcode lottery.

Beyond reliability and scope, bike-share companies can also swamp areas with their bikes without the permission of local authorities. Mobike put 1,300 bikes into London in July 2017, with Wandsworth Council flooded by hundreds of them without warning. Not only can this be a nuisance for local authorities to manage, but it can increase the likelihood of bikes being left in unsafe places. I was contacted by Dr Amy Kavanagh, who is visually impaired and uses a white cane. She says:

“these bikes have become a constant hazard. There are at least 5 schemes now in operation in my area, and on my daily commute I am constantly forced to navigate around them, which is disorientating, difficult & occasionally painful. The bikes are

abandoned all over the pavements, blocking access to tactile pavements at pedestrian crossings and creating a general nuisance for blind pedestrians”.

The same issue crops up for wheelchair users and for those with pushchairs. Dr Kavanagh asked me to

“implore the government to properly regulate these schemes, and penalise any found creating hazards by blocking access to tactile paving at pedestrian crossings.”

We must designate where, or at least how, the bicycles can be parked, perhaps in prescribed zones or at least guided by a proper code of practice. I pay tribute to the excellent work done by Cambridge City Council to develop such a code and to Transport for London for specifying the space required on pavements to get around any abandoned bikes. The problem is not just about where bikes are parked; there is no official monitoring or safety checks on the quality and maintenance of bike-share bikes, which must raise concerns about their safety.

As the chair of the all-party group on data analytics, I note that there is no requirement for bike-share companies to use the data they collect for public good. Bike-share companies collect considerable amounts of data on user journeys. If local authorities had access to anonymised data that showed trends, that could be helpful when they design active travel infrastructure improvements. Frankly, if aggregated data is being sold for profit, as many of us suspect it is, that fact should be transparent to users. People should know what is happening to data on them. At a minimum, local authorities should be able to use the data for public good.

To summarise, the Bill would regulate the prices that can be charged to users and the area covered by the service; the number and make-up of bicycle fleets; the sharing of location data, to allow oversight of fleets and distribution and to speed up the reporting of any bicycles left in inappropriate places; safety and monitoring; and where bicycles can be left and the relationship with any locally agreed code of practice. The Minister will know that I have been pressing the Department on this issue for some time. As we sit in this Chamber, the outgoing Prime Minister has been driven to the palace. Who knows: the next Prime Minister might leap aboard the nearest dockless bike and wing his way smoothly forward—or not, as the case may be. I hope the Minister has heard the details of my Bill, has got the point and will act swiftly. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Daniel Zeichner, Ruth Cadbury, Andrew Selous, Andy Slaughter, Huw Merriman, Kerry McCarthy, Alex Sobel and Alison Thewliss present the Bill.

Daniel Zeichner accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 431).

Kew Gardens (Leases) (No. 3) Bill [*Lords*]

Considered in the Legislative Grand Committee (England)

[SIR LINDSAY HOYLE *in the Chair*]

3.35 pm

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I remind hon. Members that, if there is a Division, only Members representing constituencies in England may vote.

Clause 1

POWER TO GRANT A LEASE IN RESPECT OF LAND AT
KEW GARDENS

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Chairman: With this it will be convenient to consider clause 2 stand part.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): Kew is a scientific institution of huge importance. As the global resource for knowledge of plant and fungal diversity, it plays a critical role in addressing the unprecedented scale and pace of threats facing the natural world, and indeed humanity, including the threat of climate change. It is fitting that our Secretary of State delivered his flagship environment speech last week at Kew. The fundamental purpose of the Bill is to help Kew to invest and support its vital mission in a way that also maintains and enhances this outstanding world heritage site.

The Bill amends restrictions on leases on the Crown land on Kew Gardens estate. Currently the Crown Lands Act 1702 limits leases at Kew to just 31 years; the clause amends those provisions, allowing leases up to 150 years, in line with provisions made for the Crown Estate in 1961. Clause 1(2) disapplies the 1702 Act in relation to leases granted under this Bill. The change will allow Kew to generate revenue to improve the quality of its estate and thereby to support its vital scientific mission and retain UNESCO world heritage site status. All proposals for granting long leases will be in line with Kew's world heritage site management plan, and Clause 1(3) goes further on this point.

Clause 1(3), as amended in the other place, requires that before granting any lease the Secretary of State must be satisfied that the lease, and anything that the leaseholder is permitted to do with the property under the terms of the lease, would not have any adverse impact on the functions of the board of trustees, as set out under the National Heritage Act 1983. The Secretary of State must also be satisfied that the lease would have no adverse impact on the world heritage site status. The changes do not allow the sale of the freehold of Kew land. Furthermore, the Bill will not change the freehold position of the land, which remains with the Crown; it simply provides the ability to grant longer leases on the land.

Proposals for leases will be subject to scrutiny by Kew trustees and finally signed off by the Secretary of State. Proposals for the development of existing properties and new developments will require permission from the

[David Rutley]

local planning authority advised by Historic England in consultation with local residents and other stakeholders, as well as the Kew trustees. That is unchanged from the existing governance processes.

Clause 2 is a standard provision. Subsection (1) sets out that the Bill extends to England and Wales only, this being the legal jurisdiction for property in Kew. However, the Bill applies only to Crown land at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Subsection (2) sets out the arrangements for the commencement of the Bill, two months following the day on which it is granted Royal Assent. Subsection (3) sets out the Bill's short title once it has become an Act on Royal Assent. This provides the abridged title as opposed to the long title found in the preamble. The short title of this legislation will be the Kew Gardens (Leases) Act 2019. For the reasons I have set out, I urge that these clauses stand part of the Bill.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to speak in support of this Bill. I will start by restating what my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) said on Second Reading—that Ministers can rest at ease, because the Opposition have no intention of dividing the House on this issue. Indeed, this is a Bill that we support and encourage the Government to get on with as fast as they can.

The Bill has been a long time in the making, with previous Bills started by the hon. Members for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) and Lord True. We are pleased that we have managed to come so far on this occasion, and we hope the Bill will pass all its remaining stages in the Commons today.

It is important to remember that the Bill goes back to the difficulties that Kew Gardens faced in 2014, when there was a potential funding crisis. The then director saw that Kew could lose up to 150 research staff, which would have been a tragedy given its international importance—not just for public access, but as the world's most important research institution in the areas that Kew covers. The Select Committee on Science and Technology noted at the time that Kew had difficulties transitioning away from its pure state funding model to one where it is more self-sufficient.

Kew Gardens is not only an incredible tourist attraction but an international centre of expertise and something that this country should be very proud of. I remember my last visit to Kew Gardens; I was in awe of the natural diversity that thrives in that corner of green in this metropolis of hustle, bustle, concrete and steel. The seeds and samples at Kew are unique and preserve for the future a vital resource for scientists working on tracking biodiversity. The world's largest herbaceous borders at Kew are also pretty incredible. I can only imagine the weeding and pruning that is required to keep Kew looking so inspirational and attractive. I sometimes struggle with my little garden in Plymouth, but this is on a very different scale indeed.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is giving an excellent speech, showing the many virtues of Kew Gardens. Something that he has not mentioned is Kew's important work discovering and helping with the eradication of invasive species that

could have a hugely detrimental effect on plants in the United Kingdom. Do he agree that that work within Kew Gardens is also worthy of support?

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is right. Invasive Species Week, which we marked only a few months ago, was an opportunity for us all to learn more about the species that have been introduced to the UK, either voluntarily or without our knowledge, and that are having a huge impact. Greater knowledge of global biodiversity is important in that respect.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. This is not a general debate. Members should purely be discussing the clauses at this stage. There will be an opportunity later to speak on a broader range of matters. We just need to get through the clauses in Legislative Grand Committee and then there will be some amendments on Report.

Luke Pollard: Kew is not only a fantastic tourist attraction, but it has also been a key pioneer in science and research for about 250 years. That is why it needs to be sustainable environmentally and economically, which is why we are looking at this legislation. Labour is supporting the Bill to allow leases to be extended from 31 years to 150 years in the hope that the expected £15 million windfall will make both the gardens and, importantly, the scientific research institution more sustainable. That is not to say that there are not questions that need to be raised now for the record, and there are a number of those—although very brief ones—regarding the clauses that the Minister has set out.

Funding is the key issue in this Bill. It is right that the Opposition continue to ask for the assurances that the Treasury will not deduct from Kew's core funding the capital sums generated by these reforms. Can the Minister give the House an assurance that the full value of any extra revenue derived from these changes will go directly to Kew and its scientific work, not to the Chancellor? It is a worry that the Treasury will see this as a cash bonus and take some of it away or see it as an excuse to avoid approving funding streams to Kew Gardens in future.

3.45 pm

It is important to note that the Government funding for Kew comes exclusively from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which has seen its funding slashed in recent years. Austerity is not over, regardless of what the outgoing Prime Minister may have said, and it follows that Kew has had its funding cut. Will the Minister explore getting access to funds from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Department for International Development and the Department for Education to ensure that this national treasure gets the funding it deserves to properly reflect the broad contribution and range of activities that it provides in support of the objectives in other Departments, too?

In relation to access arrangements, the Bill provides for the sale of leases of up to 150 years, which the Opposition do not oppose. However, can the Minister clarify something? Members of the public have raised concerns about whether the intention behind the sale of these leases is to sell the green spaces within Kew

Gardens. I know that that is not the Minister's intention, but given those concerns, it would be useful to be clear that this is about selling the leases on peripheral buildings to Kew Gardens and not the key assets themselves.

As we know, Kew Gardens is incredibly popular not only with local residents but with the British general public. Kew can sometimes be an expensive day out, at £42 for a family of four or £18 for one person at the gate. I recognise that local residents who live in the immediate vicinity are offered free entry, which is great if one can afford a home in the surrounding area, but that is not something that everyone can do. Will the Minister ensure that the core funding is maintained at such a level that Kew does not need to increase prices further? Not being content only with justice, will he also discuss with ministerial colleagues in DCMS and the Treasury how free entry for museums can also be funded at Kew to bring it into line with other national museums and attractions so that it can be enjoyed by everyone, regardless of their income? Does he have an understanding from Kew about what purpose the additional revenue derived from the reforms in this Bill will be put to? If so, can he state it on the record, because that would help folk to understand why this is happening?

Kew represents an absolutely essential asset to us in the fight to tackle the climate emergency, and it is right that funding is allocated in support of that. Kew is leading the way on climate change adaptation of crops. Some 50% of the calories consumed by our species come from just three big grasses—wheat, maize and rice—and that is a significant source of vulnerability within the global food system. The work being done at Kew to breed resilience into these crops is critically important and often overlooked. I would be grateful if the Minister set out whether any of the income stream that he expects to be derived from these reforms will go into its research in this area, because that would be very important.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud, who would usually have been here today, would not forgive me if I did not mention the importance of proper funding for the digitisation of the herbarium records—which, I am sure, is an issue on all our agendas. It should be, though, because Kew currently holds the world's largest records in its herbarium. That is an opportunity to learn from a collection of species that has been gathered on a global basis over many centuries, which is especially important as species are being wiped out as part of climate change and as part of human behaviour globally. More than 7 million plants specimens are kept, including 350,000 type specimens—the original specimens on which new specimen descriptions are based. If we saw a repeat of what happened at Notre Dame, this could all be lost, which would be a significant blow to our fight to stop the climate crisis.

We need to digitise the collection as a matter of urgency. There is a £40 million cost to that work. I would welcome hearing from the Minister how progress is being made and what contributions these reforms could make to this effort. There would be another big advantage. Many people all over the world want to access the records but currently have to be able to afford to go to Kew in person. If those people, especially those from the developing world, were able to access digital records, that could be transformative in the fight against

global biodiversity loss. I would be grateful if the Minister set out whether he expects any funding from the sale of the longer leases to go into these important projects.

On the basis of assurances that we have had on Second Reading and the ongoing conversations between the Opposition and the Government, we do not intend to oppose the Bill at this stage.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is great to be back once again in the English Parliament. It seems a bit similar to the UK Parliament that we usually use this building for, but it is fantastic to be here, because I now believe that the English Parliament is a treasured piece of our democratic infrastructure, where English Members of Parliament can secure debates on English-only issues. We so look forward to the many English members of this Committee coming forward to discuss and consider all the great issues of state, free from Caledonian interference.

What has the English Parliament roused itself for today? What great state of the English nation issue do we need to discuss? It is the two clauses of the Kew Gardens (Leases) (No. 3) Bill [*Lords*]. Some may say that the English Parliament is but an illusion, a mirage and a fake, and that this English Legislative Grand Committee does not properly represent and speak for England, but we say no to those doubters and deniers. This is not a sham Parliament. This is the English Parliament.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I wanted you to get that on the record, but this debate is about the Bill's clauses. You have made a good point, and quite rightly. It is a well-rehearsed point that you make on every occasion, and I welcome that, but we now need to talk about the clauses.

Pete Wishart: Absolutely, Sir Lindsay, because this Bill gets to the heart of English horticulture and all the associated democratic quandaries that need to be properly resolved and considered in this fantastic English Parliament.

This Bill rightly seeks to introduce powers to grant a lease over land at Kew for a term of up to 150 years. We can almost feel all the great Members of all the ancient English Parliaments saying, "Yes, we need to make sure that this is properly considered. We wholeheartedly agree that there should be not be a restriction in section 5 of the Crown Lands Act 1702 in relation to a lease of land at Kew." We can almost hear the Stuarts, the Plantagenets and the Roundheads. If they knew that section 5 of the 1702 Act currently prevents the sale of Crown land such as Kew and limits the length of leases over it to a term of 31 years, which is clearly insufficient, they would be turning in their decorative, medieval graves—they would be demanding 150 years for Kew Gardens, and by God this English Parliament is going to secure that for them today!

I want to make it abundantly clear before I go any further that I think that Kew Gardens is a wonderful institution. Of course it deserves to be treated properly, and the Bill sets out how to do that perfectly. We squatters are not members of this august body; we are not Members of the English Parliament. We get to participate in it and make speeches, but our vote is subject to the double majority—

The Chairman: Order. We are wandering again. There is a lot of time afterwards for you to speak, but we are discussing the clauses, not whether you have the right to vote. I accepted it earlier, but I will not allow that debate to be generated again. I know that you would never repeat yourself, but you are in danger of doing so.

Pete Wishart: I was just getting to the really important point. If we are going to consider the Bill properly, we have to look at what is in Kew Gardens. We have to—

The Chairman: Order. We are not going to go through individual plants. I was a little bit worried at the suggestion that we go back to the Plantagenets. As we know, Kew is a royal palace, and it was not Kew Gardens then, so I have allowed a little leeway, but I will not allow much more.

Pete Wishart: We are going from the Plantagenets to the plants, so perhaps we could skip a few generations if that would help. Maybe you could help me, Sir Lindsay. I thought we were considering all the clauses in the Bill in the Legislative Grand Committee. Is that correct?

The Chairman: Yes. Both of them—there are just two clauses.

Pete Wishart: Well, let us see what is in Kew Gardens—

The Chairman: Let us be honest: this Bill is purely about the extension of a lease—it is pretty straightforward. Other Members wanted to generate debate in other areas, quite rightly, but I want to ensure that we get through this stage, because I recognise that you want to move your amendments on Report, and it is important that we give you time to do that.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to you, Sir Lindsay, for mentioning the amendments. I understand that I cannot move them at this stage because I am not a member of this Committee. Is that correct?

The Chairman: No, you absolutely cannot.

Pete Wishart: So I cannot move the amendments at this stage. It has to be done on Report.

The Chairman: Order. It is not about you personally, but I think we are getting into a debate that neither of us really wants to have. I know you have great plans ahead, but this is what we are dealing with today. The fact is and the reality is that I am in the Chair, and I will be taking the decisions. Let us get back to where we were.

Pete Wishart: I hope that I will be able to make some sort of speech just to talk a little bit about what is in Kew Gardens, which the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) from the Labour party did.

The Chairman: Order. It is not about what is in Kew Gardens. You are a bright chap, so let us not test each other's patience. This is about the Bill, not what is in Kew Gardens.

Pete Wishart: May I say that we very much support this Bill? We understand that the two clauses will help significantly in trying to generate some extra funds. We believe that seven residential properties may be impacted by the Bill. We look forward to ensuring that this is dealt with adequately, so this can be moved on and the money can be generated. I think that there was talk of up to £40 million that could be disposed of if this money was available to Kew Gardens, so we very much support that.

Sir Lindsay, you are obviously not going to let me talk about anything to do with the environment of this place, what we are doing in particular and how we cannot raise particular issues, with me not being a member of this Committee, so what we will do is look to bring forward our amendments later, if we can, and on that basis, possibly to divide the House when our amendments come forward. It is just unfortunate that we are not able to discuss properly what this place and this particular institution is. I see you rising to your feet again, and you are going to stop me—

The Chairman: Order. I do not want us to fall out. I do not make the rules of the House; I am here to ensure the rules are kept. If you have a problem, please do not take it up with the Chair, but change the rules of the House. It is quite simple.

Pete Wishart: I am not taking up anything. I listened to the Labour party spokesperson speaking about these particular issues, but, because I am not a member of this Committee, I am obviously not going to be allowed to do so.

I will conclude my remarks, Sir Lindsay. The last word is that it is really unfortunate that we cannot make a point about this ridiculous institution of the English Parliament. It is unfortunate that we cannot make our points about that today.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Clearly, this is the political box office today. I am not sure what else is going on outside the confines of this Chamber, but this is where the action is taking place. We have just seen it with my hon. Friend—he should be my right hon. Friend—the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) attempting to explain why the two clauses of this Bill are in fact relevant to those of us from Scotland. We are being excluded during this Legislative Grand Committee stage, which we like to see as the English Parliament. It was created by David Cameron when he introduced the EVEL Standing Orders in 2015. And now we rejoice in it, for the first time, in its full glory, and here they all are—all the Members from England who are having their say under the changes brought forward that were going to transform democracy in the United Kingdom.

The Chairman: Order. We have been here once. I have let you get your little bit in, but now I hope that we can begin to proceed.

Patrick Grady: We can, Sir Lindsay. However, I would note—I do not know whether it was deliberate—that the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) was the Whip who actually moved the motion to bring the English Parliament into being. I do not know whether

that was deliberate on the part of the Government. I know the Serjeant at Arms will be kept busy because the Legislative Grand Committee (England) will have to meet later, after consideration. Incidentally, with autocorrects, typing “LGC (E)” automatically brings up the euro sign. I do not know whether that is some kind of ill omen for the new Prime Minister today.

I should say that it is just as well both the spokespeople, the Minister in particular, do represent seats in England. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs covers the whole United Kingdom on some aspects, and if the Minister had been a Member for a seat in Scotland or Wales, he would not actually be in a position to move that the two clauses should stand part of the Bill.

I fully support both the clauses. It is very important that Kew Gardens has the opportunity to raise additional funds through the granting of leases. We have been in communication with the management at Kew Gardens, and I hope to take up their very generous offer of a visit to the gardens in the not too distant future, because we recognise how important it is. We are not attempting to politicise Kew Gardens, and we are certainly not attempting to disrupt the ultimate passage of the Bill. However, it is important that we try to subject it, as any piece of legislation that comes through, to the scrutiny that it deserves, and this is one of the opportunities in which to do so. This also highlights, as my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire tried to do, the inadequacies of the procedures.

I have fond memories of visiting the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh as a youngster. I remember my gran, who would have turned 96 tomorrow, taking me and looking at the goldfish, so I look forward to finding out whether Kew Gardens nurtures goldfish within its boundaries.

The University of Glasgow, based in my constituency, has live connections with Kew Gardens. In January 2016, a three-year collaboration began between Kew, the National Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian and the centre for textile conservation and technical art history at the University of Glasgow to examine the science and culture of Pacific bark-cloth. The project, which is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, is investigating the traditional types of cloth worn on the islands of the Pacific—

4 pm

The Chairman: Order. Mr Grady, I am waiting to hear a connection to the leases. I have allowed you to run on for a little while—[*Interruption.*] Mr Wishart has just walked out. It is rather unusual for a Member to speak and then to walk out while the next Member is still speaking.

Patrick Grady: I am sure that my hon. Friend will be back imminently.

The Chairman: You would agree, Mr Grady, as the Whip.

Patrick Grady: Well, we are in a Committee, Sir Lindsay.

The Chairman: I want to hear the great man, and I would have thought that the Member who spoke before him would have liked to hear him, too.

Patrick Grady: It just occurred to me that we are in a Committee, Sir Lindsay, and there is provision in the Standing Orders for the Chair of a Committee to allow Members to remove their jackets if it is uncomfortably hot, so perhaps we could avail ourselves of that provision now. It would be rare to happen in the Chamber of the House, but we are in Committee.

The Chairman: That is in General Committees, and once again that is not the type of Committee we are in today. I wish I could allow that, because I am as desperate as other Members to remove my jacket, but unfortunately that is not the case.

Patrick Grady: Yes, we are currently meeting as the Legislative Grand Committee (England). Just as an aside, I do not think that the Scottish Grand Committee was ever permitted to use the Chamber of the House of Commons—

The Chairman: The hon. Gentleman is now stretching things, so I am going to call the Minister to speak.

David Rutley: Thank you, Sir Lindsay. I have an important announcement to make to the Committee, on the back of the significant points that have just been made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). I can confirm that, as he will see when he next visits Kew Gardens, there are goldfish there. I am glad that I can answer these important questions of the day that he raises.

I am grateful for the sincere co-operation of Members across the Committee, including the Opposition Front Benchers. The hon. Members for Stroud (Dr Drew) and for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) have asked some important questions, and I am grateful to them for their support. I will respond briefly to their points. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport mentioned the concerns that the Select Committee raised back in 2014-15. In 2015 Kew published its science strategy, “A Global Resource for Plant and Fungal Knowledge”, which set out clear research priorities, including research programmes. The delivery of those programmes was all subject to funding and progress has been made on many of those priorities. Kew will be refreshing its corporate strategy and its science strategy in 2020, and that work is well under way.

The hon. Gentleman asked where the extra funding would go. I can assure him that it will go to help underpin Kew’s core priorities and what it is seeking to accomplish, in England and more widely, not least in Scotland and the wider world. I can assure the hon. Member for Stroud that the funding does incorporate significant investment in digitising Kew’s herbarium collection, which is important to him and to all of us, because we want to ensure that it is conserved securely and made globally available. Importantly, it will be available online.

The funding will help Kew in its ambition to increase further its self-generated revenue and become more financially self-sufficient. I understand that it will not be used directly to reduce funding; this is to help it achieve its ambitions to grow its funding further. What is reassuring to hon. Members is that since 2009-10 we have seen the grant in aid funding from DEFRA increase from £28.6 million to £40.8 million, and at the same

[David Rutley]

Clause 1

time—this is credit to the team at Kew—Kew’s self-generated income has increased from £20 million to £70 million. This is therefore part of an ambitious and much wider scheme to help move things forward.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport was absolutely right to mention green spaces. Yes, they will be protected. The leases are around peripheral buildings at this stage and will not affect the core purpose. As I have said already, the funding will be used for the core purposes that are so vitally important for all that goes on at Kew.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of the entrance fee. The Natural History Museum and others are designated as national museums and are sponsored directly by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, although they do get funding from special exhibitions. Kew is different, and the admission and membership fees there help to raise much-needed funds of £18 million. The broader discussion about how that would shape things is for some point in the future and is certainly not for this Bill. It is good to know that the board is making significant steps forward.

The other point the hon. Gentleman raised was about extra funding from DCMS and elsewhere. He may be aware that it already receives £3 million of official development assistance funding administered from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Those are important issues, and it is worth noting that there will be a visit in due course so that Members from Scotland and elsewhere can come and see all that Kew has to offer. We will talk more about that later on.

The Bill is not large, but its impact is significant. It will enable the release of value from land and property at Kew Gardens through a variety of commercial options, such as long leases for residential or office use. It will also reduce maintenance liabilities and running costs and enhance the site through restoration and ongoing maintenance. It will help Kew in its ambition to further increase its self-generated revenue and become more financially self-sufficient. For those reasons, I hope that the Committee will approve the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Legislative Grand Committee (England)

4.7 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I have decided to select as manuscript amendments, to be proceeded with on Report, amendments 1 and 2 tabled in the name of Pete Wishart for the Legislative Grand Committee (England), to be debated together. Copies of a Report stage amendment paper will be available from the Vote Office shortly. In the meantime, we may proceed using the texts on the amendment paper for the Legislative Grand Committee (England).

POWER TO GRANT A LEASE IN RESPECT OF LAND AT KEW GARDENS

Patrick Grady: I beg to move manuscript amendment 1, page 1, line 13, at end insert—

“(3A) The Secretary of State must issue a report to the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform on any lease granted in reliance on subsection (1) to businesses or individuals based in Scotland, within four weeks of the lease being granted.”

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With this it will be convenient to discuss manuscript amendment 2, page 1, line 13, at end insert—

“(3A) As soon as possible after the end of each annual reporting period the Secretary of State must lay a report before Parliament which includes an assessment of the income accruing to the Treasury as a result of the grant of leases in reliance on subsection (1) during the annual reporting period.

(3B) ‘Annual reporting period’, in relation to subsection (3A), means—

- (a) the period of 12 months beginning with the date on which this Act is passed, and
- (b) each successive period of 12 months.”

Patrick Grady: We are now back in the United Kingdom Parliament. Can anyone spot the difference? There are some subtle changes. As we have said, the Serjeant at Arms is getting quite the workout in moving the Mace up and down. Later on, it will keep them busy when we go back into the English Legislative Grand Committee, which I think we can all agree has been an overwhelming success. Such an overwhelming success has it been that my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) has had to go and have a wee lie down in a darkened room somewhere. It falls to me to move the amendment standing in his name and those of several of my other hon. Friends.

As I was saying—I was about to say “before I was so rudely interrupted”, but that would not be respectful to you, Sir Lindsay—before proceedings were concluded in the Legislative Grand Committee a moment ago, we do not object to the Bill. We completely accept that most of its territorial extent applies to a very small part of Greater London, but there could be unintended consequences for the whole United Kingdom. What we have said since the introduction of the English votes for English laws procedure is that the Speaker or the Chair should not have to be in the invidious position of having to make what might at times become a very political or politicised decision about whether a Bill should be subject to the EVEL procedures. Perhaps there is a case for further devolution, of some description, to different parts of the United Kingdom of ways in which legislation that is relevant only to England can be discussed by directly elected representatives from that part of the United Kingdom. However, we have been able to prove demonstrably—today in particular, and since they were introduced—that the EVEL procedures are not the way to do it.

The EVEL procedures have their own little chapter in the new edition of “Erskine May”. I pay tribute to its editors—I am the proud owner of a signed copy. The EVEL chapter is nicely self-contained; it is almost like an en-suite chapter of “Erskine May” with the possibility

of its being deleted almost entirely without notice, when the inevitable day comes when the EVEL Standing Orders are wiped away. They will be wiped away either because there will no longer be Members of Parliament from Scotland, because Scotland will have become an independent country—I believe that day is coming very soon—or because they are simply not convenient for whichever Government come into power and have the majority to do that, so they completely defeat the purpose for which they were set up.

EVEL was only ever set up as a convenient political tool for the then Prime Minister, David Cameron. It is ironic that we end up having this procedure on the day when his old Etonian friend finally takes power. If people are baffled by the procedure that has taken place today in the House of Commons, and which will continue to take place as we go back into a Legislative Grand Committee for a consent motion, goodness knows how baffled they will be when they see the drama beginning to unfold on Downing Street.

I put on record our support for Kew Gardens' work. I was talking about the connections that exist with institutions in Scotland. The Glasgow Botanic Gardens, which are a jewel in my west end constituency, also have long historical links with Kew. Professor Sir William Jackson Hooker was appointed professor of botany in 1821 at the University of Glasgow and he went on to become a director at Kew Gardens. He was succeeded by his son, Joseph Dalton Hooker, who was also a graduate of the University of Glasgow. I was speaking briefly about the collaboration between Kew, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History and the Centre for Textile Conservation and Technical Art History at the University of Glasgow on traditional culture and practice in Pacific islands. I suspect I am now lining up a visit to that institution in the University of Glasgow as well as a visit to Kew Gardens. That is an example of cutting-edge research and the importance of leveraging adequate finance to support it. That is one of the purposes of granting the lease set out in clause 1.

The other thing that Kew Gardens is working on, along with other institutions, is tackling climate change. There is a climate emergency, as anyone who was watching footage from the Mall 25 minutes ago will know. I was very interested to read that this year, Kew Gardens has awarded the Kew international medal to Dr Mary Robinson for her work on climate justice. Glasgow Caledonian University, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), has a fantastic research institute on the concept of climate justice. Dr Robinson is a patron of that institute and I have had the huge privilege of meeting her. I am delighted that she has been given that award by Kew Gardens. The Scottish Government have long espoused the importance of climate justice as a way of tackling climate change and helping people who have been the worst affected but have done the least to cause climate change to mitigate and tackle it. That is one reason why we wanted to make the point about the extent of the Bill and the importance of unintended consequences, and it is why we have tabled the amendments.

Amendment 1 would require a Minister to inform the Scottish Government of any business or individual based in Scotland who is granted a lease under the terms of the Bill. That could be useful and important for a number of reasons: the new leaseholder, for example,

might be applying for similar development rights in Scotland, or they may be a stakeholder in an ongoing policy consultation or policy developments of some other kind north of the border. If we had a statutory reporting mechanism of the kind that we propose in the amendment, it would provide an opportunity for Scottish Government Ministers to be fully aware of what was happening.

Amendment 2 is more to the point. It is about the tax take and the sums that will accrue to the Treasury from any lease granted. One of the key purposes of the Bill, as we have heard in the various debates, is to raise badly needed funds for the gardens' research and investment programme—I again pay tribute to the gardens' work.

4.15 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Does the hon. Member intend to let hon. Members who have gathered in the House for the debate on youth services, or lack thereof, to discuss that important matter? The number of pages left of his speech indicates that he does not. It would be nice if he could inform the House of his intentions so that we can get to that important business.

Patrick Grady: The hon. Lady raises an important point. I do not intend to detain the House desperately long. I want to ensure that that debate can be had. It is particularly relevant, of course, to Members from England and Wales. We just had a procedure of the so-called English Parliament. This was what was supposed to happen as a result of the independence referendum and the reform of devolution, but it is patently failing, as she demonstrates. There are only two amendments, however, and I am speaking about the second, so her patience should not be tested for too much longer.

One of the key points is that the leases will raise money. That money will generate tax take, that tax take will go to the Treasury, and that money will eventually work its way into public expenditure, first through the UK consolidated fund, and then, presumably, some of it will end up in the Scottish consolidated fund through the Barnett formula. This has been the crux of our problem with the EVEL procedure from the very start—We do not see the full consequences and knock-on effects. That is why the amendment suggests that the Minister make an estimate or report on the sums expected to accrue to the Treasury as a result of any lease granted.

We were told when the EVEL procedure was introduced that we would be able to scrutinise all these things through the estimates process, but this is not the only time my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire has been called out of order and required by the Chair to resume his seat, because previously when he tried to talk about estimates, he was also ruled out of order and was unable to speak. There has been a small reform to the estimates process, which we have welcomed, but it is still not sufficient for us to have the kind of say we want. We cannot table meaningful amendments and the subjects and time available for debate are still limited.

We are demonstrating, even in the frustration of the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) about the squeeze on the important debate to follow on youth services in England, the fundamental failures, first of the EVEL system, and secondly of the overall impact of the attempt at reform and the potential silencing of

[Patrick Grady]

voices from England and Wales. The EVEL procedure, sadly, is becoming a laughing stock. There is a risk of Parliament falling into the same trap. Certainly, laughing stocks will not be in short supply outside our doors and down Whitehall.

Politics is a bit chaotic at the moment, and these kinds of procedural shenanigans do not enhance that, but they serve to prove the point. In the interests of consensus and not delaying the Bill any further by sending it to ping-pong with the Lords, I do not intend to press my amendments, but I hope the point has been made, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

David Rutley: I will be brief, because I am aware that the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) and others want to get on to the next debate. I fully understand that.

I am grateful for the support we have received from the Opposition Front Benchers. In these situations, it is important to learn lessons from other hon. Members, such as the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who, I always find, uses good humour, a probing wit and maximum respect for the subject and the people involved. I was getting a little bit nervous at the tone of an hon. Member whom I like, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). I was concerned that some of his understandable comments about the process were beginning to reflect on to Kew itself, so I am pleased that the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) clarified that that was certainly not the case. One thing's for sure—Kew is certainly not a laughing stock. It is a much valued asset, and I am pleased he reinforced that.

Amendment 1 is not necessary and is not clearly drafted. Should information on the granting of a specific lease be required by anyone, including the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, in line with the Land Registry publication requirements, the price paid for the lease and the relevant details of the leaseholder and the lease document itself will be available from the Land Registry when the lease is registered. I think the hon. Gentleman is aware of that. It is unclear what information the amendment would require to be in any report, but information on a lease, including price and lease conditions, will be available to the public and any Government Minister.

On amendment 2, under the National Heritage Act 1983 a statement of accounts for Kew is prepared, examined and certified in respect of each financial year. This annual report and accounts is reviewed by the Comptroller and Auditor General—the head of the National Audit Office—and laid before each House. Details of Kew's income, including Government, commercial and charitable donations, are set out in the report, which is a public document. As already stated in the other place, income received by Kew in respect of those leases will be reflected in the report.

I hope that assures the hon. Gentleman that the issue has been taken care of. He was probably already aware of the points I have made, and he has had an opportunity to make his wider points, so, for the benefit of this particular Bill and the impact it will have on the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, I ask him to withdraw his amendment.

Patrick Grady: I do not get to say this very often, but I accept the Minister's reassurances. I think our point has been made and I look forward to seeing whether the Government Whips Office tries to use this procedure again at any point, ever. If it does not, perhaps it just needs to get rid of the whole procedure. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Consideration completed. Does the Minister intend to move the consent motion for the Legislative Grand Committee?

David Rutley indicated assent.

The House forthwith resolved itself into the Legislative Grand Committee (England) (Standing Order No. 83M(3)).

[SIR LINDSAY HOYLE in the Chair]

4.22 pm

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I remind hon. Members that, if there is a Division, only Members representing constituencies in England may vote. I call the Minister to move the consent motion.

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That the Committee consents to the Kew Gardens (Leases) (No.3) Bill [Lords].—(David Rutley.)

Patrick Grady: I am just trying to beat the record of my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) for being the Member from Scotland who has spoken most frequently in the Legislative Grand Committee. It is not just the occupants of the Serjeant at Arms chair who are getting exercise; you are, too, Sir Lindsay, as you move up and down, from Chair to Chair. This should not just be a formality. It defeats the entire purpose of the process. I hope that has been heard by Members on the Treasury Bench.

Question put and agreed to.

The occupant of the Chair left the Chair to report the decision of the Committee (Standing Order No. 83M(6)).

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair; decision reported.

Third Reading

Queen's consent signified.

4.24 pm

David Rutley: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I am pleased to move the motion for the Third Reading of the Bill, which will provide the ability to grant leases of up to 150 years on Crown land at Kew Gardens, opening up new streams of revenue that will support this great British institution and world heritage site to flourish.

Kew is a scientific institution of towering importance, not only for the UK but as a global resource for authoritative specialist knowledge on plant and fungal diversity and its role in supporting essential ecosystems, which play a critical role in addressing the unprecedented scale and pace of the threats facing the natural world and indeed humanity. Kew is custodian of one of the largest and most diverse collections of plant and fungal specimens, living and preserved, collected from around

the world over 170 years, with 25,000 specimens added each year from the Millennium Seed Bank at Wakehurst to the herbarium at Kew itself.

These collections are of immense use and fundamental importance to science in determining how species differ and develop, and which ones are threatened by extinction—an issue of grave international concern. To restore and digitise this incredible collection to make it accessible across the world requires considerable investment, as has been set out. This Bill will enhance Kew's ability to attract non-governmental funding, providing further income for these and other important investments.

Kew is home to more scientists than ever before, working in partnership with scientists, educators and communities to promote research, education and conservation. And Kew does much to involve the public too: we make more than 2 million visits a year to Kew and Wakehurst, and around 100,000 pupils learn from its many wonders on school trips. Across the spectrum of public engagement, Kew is fostering a wider understanding of plants and fungi and why they matter to us.

I am delighted by the support from parliamentarians in the Second Reading debate, and an invitation has been extended for interested parliamentarians across the board to visit Kew on the morning of 9 October from 8.45 to 10.45; hopefully they will have received the invitation already. I am still more delighted that the Government have had the opportunity to bring this Bill forward, building on the efforts of those who have promoted similar Bills on Kew through the private Member's Bill route: my hon. Friends the Members for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) and for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) and Lord True in the other place. In the other place the Bill was amended by Lord Whitty to ensure robust protection for Kew's core functions and the world heritage site. I am grateful to Members in this House and noble Lords in the other place for their contributions.

I extend my thanks to the team at Kew, including the trustees, for all they do, as well as the officials on the Bill team, my private office, the Parliamentary Private Secretaries, the Whips on both sides and of course the Clerks for their work and support on this issue.

As the Minister in the Commons with responsibility for the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, it has been an honour to lead on this Bill. Our debate in this House has enabled me to underline the global importance of Kew and the Government's commitment to its future. I believe that the Bill's progress through both Houses has been a model of Parliamentary process, working together effectively to ensure that the Bill is fit for purpose. I look forward to the Bill's speedy progress towards Royal Assent.

4.27 pm

Luke Pollard: There is very little to add to the remarks I made earlier, so as I want the House to come to the next debate as soon as possible, I shall briefly say that I am grateful to the Minister for his support for the ongoing digitalisation of the herbarium records and the recognition that the income derived from the sale of these leases will go to support Kew's ongoing work. We need more, bolder and swifter action to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss, and Kew Gardens plays

an important part in Britain's soft-power and hard-power interventions in doing that, and I wish it the best of luck in selling these leases so we can make sure that work continues.

4.28 pm

Patrick Grady: I just want to reinforce what we said earlier: we have points to make on procedures in this place, but the work that Kew does is immensely valuable. We hold it in the greatest of respect and look forward to the success of this Bill.

I also wanted to say before I was cut short earlier that we have been fortified in our contributions in the House this evening by some tea and cakes we were having in celebration of the birthday of Anne Harvey who works in the SNP Whips Office; she celebrates a very significant birthday next week, and we hope that goes on the record for her. But we wish the Bill every success.

4.28 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): It is a sad commentary on—or almost a tragic indication of or a metaphor for—our times that a Bill like this which every sane, sensible person would support wholeheartedly seems to have run into the mire of parliamentary procedure. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) normally exhibits a warmth and amity so typical of his Caledonian cousins, and he normally extends this warm cloak of friendship over all of us and wishes nothing more than to accelerate the proceedings of the House, but on this occasion there was a smidgen of sarcasm about his words; it pains me grievously to say that. He implied that somehow this was not a matter of great moment beyond west London—although west London is obviously a place of great significance.

Kew Gardens is a global treasure store. It is a world bank and a world centre of excellence, yet the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire—one of the very few Members of this House to have exposed himself to the nation on “Top of the Pops” when he was playing with Runrig—somehow implied that this was not an issue that stretched beyond west London. I immediately thought of F. E. Smith during the Established Church (Wales) Bill, when he suggested that the eyes of the entire world would be on us. Hon. Members may remember Chesterton's comment at the time:

“Are they clinging to their crosses, F. E. Smith,
Where the Breton boat-fleet tosses,
Are they, Smith?
Do they, fasting, trembling, bleeding,
Wait the news from this our city?
Groaning ‘That’s the Second Reading!’
Hissing ‘There is still Committee!’”

This is an important Bill, and I have to say that the Minister has exhibited many of the great skills of the horticulturalists. He has been patient and allowed the Bill to grow before us. He has batted off invasive species using only organic principles—

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Stephen Pound: I was coming on to chemicals, but of course I will give way.

Gordon Marsden: In his encomium for the Minister, will my hon. Friend ask him whether he has done enough pruning?

Stephen Pound: The parliamentary secateurs—if not the snips—certainly should have been exhibited earlier on.

Kew Gardens is not just a world centre and seed bank; it is also a place of huge entertainment. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) talked about a concrete and steel part of the world that is illuminated and enlivened by this patch of green. Actually we are not all concrete and steel in west London, but we are grateful for that patch of green. Many of us will go along to the exhibitions, and not just the incredible Christmas celebrations—*[Interruption.]* What? I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker, but it always hurts me when a voice from the Rhondda is in any way attacking me. Kew is not just a place of great entertainment and an extraordinary resource for the world; it also has a new function nowadays. All over London we have these pop-up gardens on large, soulless council estates, and it is Kew that people go to for information on this. It is Kew that provides the details of plants that do not need a huge amount of watering or that can be resistant to problems. I am glad to see that the leader of the all-party parliamentary group on horticulture and gardening, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), is on the Front Bench today. I trust that that means she has been promoted. All I can say is that Kew is for the world; it is not just for us in London. The Minister has done an excellent job, and I hope that we can leave aside the sourness and bitterness that may occasionally have been exhibited this afternoon and celebrate the glory that is Kew.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Youth Services

4.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role and sufficiency of youth services.

The Government have called this debate today as a response to the publication of the inquiry by the all-party parliamentary group on youth affairs, which was published in April. I am delighted that the Secretary of State and my colleague with the arts and culture brief are here to support me in responding to the report. I recently met the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) to discuss the report. It is a very impressive piece of work and, as I said at the time, the all-party group and its teams should be commended for it. We will of course respond in detail to all the report's recommendations presently. Today I would like to continue that spirit of cross-party co-operation and focus on our young people, and to highlight what the Government are already doing to address the subject of sufficiency in youth work. I look forward to hearing Members' views.

I shall turn first to the youth work curriculum and qualifications. On training for youth workers, we will renew the youth work curriculum and national occupational standards. We will also renew the entry level qualifications into youth work, and I am pleased to announce today that we will establish a new level 3 youth work apprenticeship. We know that these are particularly valuable to frontline youth workers—paid workers and, importantly, volunteers—and we are doing this because we know the power of a trusted relationship between a young person and an appropriately trained adult. This can absolutely transform a young person's life.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the voluntary youth workers, both in my constituency of Crawley and up and down the country, who give so much of their time not just through council youth services but through other youth groups such as the Cubs, Brownies and Scouts?

Mims Davies: I know the importance of youth work interventions in my hon. Friend's community and town, which can be seen in the football club, the charity movement and in terms of prevention. I completely agree with him regarding the uniformed youth.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The Minister is making some important comments, given that a 15-year-old was shot by somebody on a motorbike in Coventry last Saturday. The point that I am trying to make is that 87% of local authorities have cut at least one portion of their youth services over the past 10 years, and we must do something about that. To put it another way, £3 billion has been cut from youth services over the past 10 years, so how are the Government going to try to make up for that, bearing in mind that police resources are badly stretched? I am not making a political point, but we still have a shortage of policemen.

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that. The loss of one young life on our streets is one too many. When we are making decisions about local services, it is important that councillors and councils recognise

the impact of their decisions, and I have been one of those people having to make decisions in challenging circumstances. Our young people matter, and I will be coming on to that later in my comments, but I hope today's debate will make it clear that, whether cross-Government or cross-party, we absolutely do care.

The new qualification that I mentioned earlier will be accessed by those working in a volunteer capacity—perhaps in small voluntary organisations—and they may not have the significant sums needed, so I can also confirm today that we are providing £500,000 in bursaries for potential students who would otherwise not be able to pay, benefiting up to some 400 students.

Turning to further investment, the youth investment fund has a three-year, £40 million collaboration with the national lottery, and I thank the players who are helping us to support the fund. The collaboration will benefit 90 voluntary and community organisations working in disadvantaged communities. A great example of that is the detached youth work done on the Pallister estate in Middlesbrough, which engages with 60 to 80 young people each week and has contributed to a reported decline in antisocial behaviour rates in the community. That successful model means that the delivery agency, Youth Focus: North East, is working with a local community business to establish a permanent building for young people on the estate.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Youth First provides fantastic youth services across Lewisham, and it was instrumental in bringing the community together when 15-year-old Jay Hughes was murdered last November. However, it is chronically underfunded owing to cuts to our local authority, so it cannot provide the detached youth workers that the Minister just mentioned. Does she agree that we must invest in youth services, so that they can play that vital role in tackling youth violence and supporting our communities?

Mims Davies: I agree with the hon. Lady. It is far too easy in council chambers to overlook our young people, because we perhaps do not think about them when making difficult decisions. I have heard about the benefits of detached youth work, and it is vital that the Government look to support it. I have already made a case to the incoming Prime Minister about the importance of our young people, and I will continue to do that while I am in this role.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) has already mentioned uniformed youth groups. We invested £5 million in 2018-19 through the uniformed youth fund, supporting the Sea Cadets, Boys Brigade and Girlguiding, to expand opportunities to take part into the most deprived wards. Over 10,000 new places for young people have been created as a result. There is another great example in Liverpool, where the Fire Cadets have a new unit in schools for young people with autism. This funding is enabling uniformed youth organisations to reach out, modernise their websites and improve their training materials.

What has happened in the National Citizen Service? To date, 500,000 young people have taken part, and 100,000 more will do so this summer. That means an additional 15 million hours of volunteering via the NCS.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): It is good to hear that there are some isolated examples of youth work going on, but in my county of Derbyshire every single youth worker has been made redundant—ironically, on the same day we had our first knife stabbing by young people, in Buxton. That is what is happening up and down the country. Isolated examples—the NCS lasts for two weeks—are no replacement for the long-term relationships and commitment that youth workers give young people around our country.

Mims Davies: It is vital that our young people have an opportunity to be involved in the NCS, but it is also vital that we have other interventions. I do not see this as a case of one or the other, although I understand the point the hon. Lady is making.

I confirm today ongoing funding of £280,000 to six of our most promising Centre for Social Action initiatives, to help them to grow. That includes support for the Grandmentors initiative run by Volunteering Matters, which uses mentoring to help our young care leavers. This complements the existing outstanding work done by civil society and our local authorities.

Local councils have a statutory duty to provide services for our young people. No one can deny that there has been an operational challenge in the financial environment for that provision, but as we perhaps heard just now, open access to youth services has in some cases been far too easy to target for cuts. Credit should therefore go to those local authorities that have helped to set up new structures, attracting new partners and direct funding into this space. We have seen fantastic examples of this from Devon to Doncaster, in Manchester and on Merseyside. That is why—this is key—we have launched a review of guidance for our local councils on the statutory duty to provide youth services. The Government want to see a more accessible approach, without putting any underfunded burdens on our local authorities.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for her kind words about our meeting. I welcome the fact that the Government have agreed to review the statutory guidelines and how councils are fulfilling their duties. Will she ensure that the guidelines set out a basic right for every young person to access youth services every night of the week, or will this review just be a wishy-washy statement of principles for councils to follow?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who I know is passionate about this area and absolutely doing all the right work to promote the positives available for our young people. It is absolutely right that they should know what they can expect from this Government and from the community. I will come on to that in relation to the youth charter, but let me briefly address the charter now. It is absolutely right that our young people get a chance to grow, mature and find things for themselves, and that is absolutely about a youth offer. That is why, when I came into this post, it was clear to me that a youth charter—a youth offer—setting out what our next generation could and should expect had to be addressed. I am very pleased to be taking that work forward, and I will say more about it shortly.

[Mims Davies]

We are committed to keeping our young people safe, and tackling serious violence is a priority for this Government and our communities. At April's knife crime summit, at which the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) joined us, all Government Departments were at the table, as were Sport England, the Premier League, sporting governing bodies, and representatives of the arts, culture and civil society. They all agreed to work together to strengthen the sporting offer to tackle serious violence and other problems. The Home Office has launched a £200 million endowment to fund grassroots interventions. That is in addition to the £22 million early intervention youth fund. This week, I announced that Sport England will provide a further £400,000 of national lottery funding to 49 projects to deliver strong, targeted sports offers ahead of the summer holidays.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for that, and I have to say that Newham has in the past benefited from such projects. However, the applications were due in yesterday, and the money has to be spent by March. It is a complete waste of money to try to do these projects in an ad hoc way, year after year. We need a proper, costed programme that runs from the beginning of the year and can be planned properly, instead of squandering the money that is put in place.

Mims Davies: I agree. A concerted effort for our young people through long-term funding is the way forward. Salami-slicing is not helpful in this situation. I am sure that my officials will have heard that. This offer is about knowing what works, amplifying that, spreading it out, and supporting it.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab) *rose*—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) *rose*—

Mims Davies: I will take an intervention from the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) first, because she looks frustrated.

Gill Furniss: I thank the Minister for giving way. My constituency has seen a significant rise in knife crime and organised gangs. Recently, two youth workers, Fran Belbin and Lloyd Samuels, came to my surgery and explained their frustrations with the funding formula that my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) mentioned. It would be fantastic if the new Prime Minister committed to a five-year strategy that gave all sorts of bodies, whether from the voluntary sector or the council, a good go at improving things for our young people, because at the moment, people are bidding against each other for bits of funding and are given very short timescales for preparing a plan. For instance, this year, people were made aware of the funding only a few weeks before the school holidays, and having been awarded the funding, they have a week to pull things together for the young people. That is not good enough.

Mims Davies: In my experience in this role, I have found brilliant projects ready to roll, and I like to think that we will have no problem finding the right interventions

this summer, but I hear what the hon. Lady says. The incoming Prime Minister will find—I have to be careful in what I say—that we are committed to a youth charter, a 10-year vision for a generation. I will absolutely make the case for us to continue with that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mims Davies: I will take an intervention from the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), and then I will try to limit the interventions I take, because I want to hear from other Members.

Chris Bryant: I am grateful. Young people from the poorest backgrounds are four times more likely to suffer a traumatic or acquired brain injury. There is lots of evidence that those teenagers who do, and who have less developed executive functions in their brain—though some parts of their brain will already be very well developed—end up being the youngsters who get excluded from school, because they appear to be misbehaving, and end up in the criminal justice system. Is it not vital that we make sure that those teenagers, particularly those from poorer backgrounds, get the medical and rehabilitation support that they need, so that they do not end up in the criminal justice system?

Mims Davies: The hon. Gentleman is right. If we intervene once a young person is in the criminal justice system, we are in some ways intervening far too late. That does not mean that there cannot be change from there, but we should be intervening sooner. This week, I have been working with the Minister for safeguarding, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), across the whole sector, on making sure that people with a challenged background get a chance to get into employment. It is absolutely right that the hon. Member for Rhondda should mention early intervention.

I do not want to undersell the impact of what Sport England is doing; through that, we will reach more than 3,000 additional young people under 25, giving them key skills, coaching and further opportunities. These projects demonstrate the power of sport to inspire. Culture, arts and heritage can also offer young people in our communities a way out, a new chance, and take them away from the risk of violence and gangs.

I have been looking in the Department for a concerted effort on discrimination and racism and the power of sport to inspire. Today, the Football Association, the Premier League and the English Football League have written to me to set out their next steps on tackling racism and discrimination, following the summit I called earlier this year. They have set out stronger education measures, improved reporting systems and better training and support for referees and stewards. There is more to do, and I expect the issue to be at the top of the agenda for the whole of football in the next season.

Let me turn to the other interventions we have made regarding the school sport and activity action plan. A third of our young people—especially girls, children from poorer backgrounds and some children from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds—are doing less than half of the recommended amount of exercise each day. We have published our new school sport and activity

action plan, which will ensure that young people are able to get the benefit of 60 minutes of daily sport and physical activity.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The Minister raises an interesting point. We need joined-up Government, with the involvement of education, including further education, which has lost a lot of money. Often, if we can channel a young person into further education, they can make their mind up and may want to go to university. It is a joined-up process and that is the approach that has to be taken.

Mims Davies: I will come to that joined-up approach shortly, because it is absolutely key.

We must ensure that young people are able to have a say in the policies that affect them. I have launched three further cross-Government youth voice projects, which enable young people to input directly into policies and design them, alongside officials and politicians. Whether it is hearing from the young people who attended the recent summit on serious violence or our youth steering group that advises the Government on environmental action, we are making sure that young people are being listened to.

The theme of today's debate is the sufficiency of youth services. I have outlined some of the things we have done and the plans we have made. In April this year, the Government announced that we would develop a youth charter. We need to ask ourselves whether we are sufficiently ambitious on behalf of our young people. Through the charter, we will be. We will bring together policies from across Government and listen to views from young people, those who work with them and, importantly, those who care for our young people. I wish to say a huge thank you to the youth sector organisations that have shared in and embraced the opportunity to work with us to develop the charter so far. It is a commitment to a generation, for a generation. I want the youth charter to have a clear message for our young people: we back them and we are listening to them—to all of them. We are not stereotyping them and we are not limiting them, and we will make sure that if they speak or act in a different way, we will hear them.

Every young voice matters. The Government are determined that all young people will be supported to reach their full potential. We want this country to be the best place in the world to be young.

4.53 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I thank the Government for scheduling this general debate on the role and sufficiency of youth services. The Opposition welcome any new moneys announced today, because they are certainly needed for the youth-work sector. I join the Minister in welcoming the all-party group's inquiry on youth work, which was published earlier this year, and commend my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) and the National Youth Agency for their role in that important body of work that will have a lot of influence on this debate.

Youth services play a vital role in our communities. They provide a safe space for young people to be creative, develop friendships and learn new skills, all

with a trusted adult. However, this vital public service and the youth-work profession continue to be misunderstood and under-appreciated. Youth work is often misrepresented as sport, which is not what it is. Too often, youth services are depicted as a meeting place for young people to knock a ball about on a battered ping-pong table, yet that could not be further from the truth.

Youth work is a distinct educational process that focuses on young people's defined needs through non-formal learning. Its key purpose, as outlined in the recent all-party group inquiry, is to facilitate young people's personal, social and educational development, to enable them to develop their voice, influence and place in society and to reach their full potential.

Youth services also play a crucial role in interacting with other services for young people where additional needs or opportunities are identified from formal education and social services to criminal justice, healthcare, housing and benefits. However, over the past decade, the Government have failed to recognise those benefits and have dismantled the entire infrastructure of youth services.

Since 2010, local authority spending has fallen from £1.1 billion to just £384 million, a 70% reduction in real terms. In my home county of Lancashire—you might know it well, Mr Deputy Speaker—that reduction rises to 78%. In the Minister's own patch of Hampshire, the scale of cuts is even higher at 95%. As a result, at least 760 youth centres have closed their doors up and down the country. However, there are still fragments of excellent provision across the country. Labour councils have sought to protect services and their communities and, where funds have been cut, have innovated to continue to deliver a service for young people.

Barking and Dagenham Council is soon to open London's first youth zone to offer first-class facilities to thousands of young people. Despite cuts in the council's budget, it is innovating to ensure that all young people still have access to youth services. However, the youth service in England no longer exists as it did—as a service provided in every local authority area—with its specialist team of professionals and dedicated buildings and projects for young people.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is touching on the really important point of the sustainability of youth services, which depends on adequate workforce training. One impact of the deep cuts to local authorities has surely been the inability to continue the sort of training that we have seen in the past. Does she agree that, although we may welcome the 400 posts that I think I heard the Minister talk about earlier, that still falls well short of what is needed to provide an ambitious workforce and that we really need to focus on workforce sustainability as part of any strategy?

Cat Smith: My hon. Friend pre-empts a future section of my speech, where I go into detail about that. He is absolutely right and I agree with every word that he said about the sustainability of the workforce. In many ways, youth work is the first public service to have been dismantled. The uncertainty over local government funding creates growing challenges for local authorities to innovate and to provide for these services. It is a testament to our voluntary sector that provision has not completely collapsed under the weight of these cuts. I want to pay tribute to traditional organisations such as the Sea Cadets, the

[Cat Smith]

YMCA, the Scouts, the Guides, the Boys Brigade and the Girls Brigade that have innovated to keep open access youth work alive. We have seen many new and innovative models of delivering youth provision, spanning public, private and civil society partners to deliver excellent provision for young people in some areas.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): As well as the traditional voluntary sector names, social enterprises play a key role in delivering youth services and use other income streams through enterprise to fund youth services, but that is insufficient. We have seen a huge cut in funding and people having to rely on lottery funding, charitable trusts and short commissioning cycles. We are seeing a real volatility in the sector. Is it not time that we had some sufficiency in the sector so that those organisations, the voluntary sector and the councils can provide a really good-quality youth service?

Cat Smith: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the diversity of the current provision of youth work, and I pay tribute to the work that he does in Leeds, where he champions young people's needs. I look forward to working with him over the summer on a particular project that he is launching.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way; she is being very generous. This is just to tie the two previous interventions together. Something that concerns me is that so much of the delivery now is on a project basis, so we do not get the career, the professionalisation and that real expertise and experience in our youth workforce that we have had previously. Over the past nine years, we have seen a tragic hollowing out of this important service.

Cat Smith: I agree. That is why much of the excellent work that is being delivered is being done by volunteers and lower-level qualified youth workers. Many services are lacking that sufficiency of management and the qualified youth workers, as well as the administrative resources, which are all too often focused on applying for short-term funding.

Voluntary sector innovation has not happened everywhere, and it is reliant on talented individuals and committed organisations. Does the Minister agree that we are feeling a real gap as a result of the withdrawal of local authorities' role in leading and facilitating youth work provision and that this is a burden on the already overstretched voluntary sector?

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a very important point. I have been involved in youth work off and on for most of my adult life, and what I see now is voluntary organisations providing fantastic work—she has already referred to the uniformed organisations and YMCAs such as mine in north Staffordshire—but, to coin a phrase, there needs to be a backstop and that backstop needs to be the statutory services. Nowhere is that felt more than in rural areas, where often, despite the fantastic efforts of volunteers, there are simply not enough people who are able or who have the necessary training—even volunteers need training now—to fulfil that, so young people in rural areas are missing out.

Cat Smith: I agree with the hon. Gentleman's point, particularly with regard to rural services. Young people in rural areas can feel particularly isolated because when the school bus drops them back off in their village at perhaps 3.30 or 4 o'clock, that is it until the next morning. That is increasingly the case, as those are some of the areas where we have seen youth provision really drop off a cliff.

Ruth George: My hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) have made excellent points about services in rural areas. High Peak is another rural area that is now being targeted by county lines drugs gangs. Our young people desperately need youth services at the exact time when they are being decimated and taken away.

Cat Smith: My hon. Friend makes an excellent plea for youth services. There is a particular need in areas that are being targeted by county lines, which are having an impact on young people's lives. This really highlights the importance of today's debate. I am pleased to see that so many Members want to speak, so with the permission of other Members, I will make some progress with my speech so that we can hear from Back Benchers.

The loss of this open access youth work has had a devastating impact on young people's lives because they simply cannot get any of the support they need when they do not meet the threshold for the targeted interventions. As a result, young people have lost the role models—someone who they can build a trusted relationship with—who can empower them to realise their own strengths and divert them away from potential harms. They have lost safe spaces: somewhere to go outside school hours to develop social networks and friendship groups outside school and to have a sense of belonging and ownership in their local area. They have also lost opportunities—to learn new skills, to take part in social action projects and perhaps even to re-engage with education.

As Parliament goes into recess and schools go into their summer holidays, the impact of these cuts on young people's lives will be felt to an even greater extent. I welcome the Minister's announcement in her opening remarks of £400 million funding for sport this summer, with the national lottery, but it strikes me as being too little too late, given that the schools are breaking up for their summer holidays this week, as we are doing here in Westminster. In this context, it is hardly surprising that we are seeing chronic levels of loneliness and mental ill health and a rising number of children and young people tragically involved in knife crime and gangs. This is supported by research conducted by the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime, which found that local authority areas suffering the largest cuts to spending on young people have seen the biggest increases in knife crime.

The Government decision to slash youth services for the sake of short-term cash savings is reckless and short-sighted. Last Friday, I visited Central Lancaster High School in my constituency, where I discussed with the head the challenges the school faces in supporting young people without having a youth service to pick up the pieces outside the school gates. The head told me that the school has had to invest heavily in student support officers, behaviour mentors and alternative

provision education programmes—for example, the Queensberry alternative provision programme, which works with students at risk of exclusion to engage them in projects and activities and which has led to a massive shift in their attitudes and behaviours, with one year 10 student saying,

“Queensberry helps me to think before I do”,

and another saying,

“I think more about the impact of what I do.”

Such programmes allow young people the space to reflect, which is not often found in the school environment. However, this school-based provision comes at significant cost to the school budget, which is already diminishing in real terms year on year.

Henry Smith: Will the hon. Lady acknowledge that the National Citizen Service, as I witnessed last Friday in my constituency, is enabling young people to tackle knife crime, for example, as they are doing in my local programme? While there is a lot more to do, that is already having a positive impact.

Cat Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Last week, I visited a National Citizenship Service programme at Lancaster and Morecambe College and, as he probably did in his constituency, spoke to the young people there about issues of democracy, for example. I think that he will have picked up on similar concerns. Young people are deeply concerned about knife crime. The NCS offers a space where young people from different schools and different areas of the community can mix and, we hope, build lasting friendships—but in itself, of course, it is not youth work because it is just for a period of weeks over the summer.

A major flaw in the current system is the lack of statutory protections for youth work. The previous Labour Government attempted to strengthen the legislation by placing a duty on local authorities to secure sufficient access to positive activities for young people. However, because there is no legal definition of what access to provision should look like, this is open to interpretation and can be ignored by local authorities when faced with significant Tory cuts. As the Minister reminded us, work is finally under way following the Government's commitment to review the statutory guidance for youth services in last year's civil society strategy. However, will she go one step further and follow Labour's policy of introducing new legislation that clearly defines a base level of sufficiency to reflect every young person's right to access high-quality youth work provision close to where they live?

Youth workers are the unsung heroes of our community, yet they lack any professional status. Social workers, teachers, police officers, nurses and doctors all have agreed standards and thresholds to achieve before they can be given those recognised titles, but anyone can call themselves a youth worker, regardless of their knowledge, skills, attitude or motive. Does the Minister agree that this is putting children and young people at risk and that this important profession deserves recognition?

Workforce numbers have collapsed under this Government. Between 2008 and 2016, 14,500 youth and community workers have lost their jobs, according to the latest Local Government Association workers survey. Many qualified youth workers have migrated into other occupations. In recent years, we have seen significant reductions in the number of Joint Negotiating Committee

degree programmes in England and the number of students enrolling on undergraduate courses. In 2007, there were more than 60 courses on offer; today, there are just 39. This has left real challenges for organisations seeking to recruit professional youth workers and increased their dependency on volunteers.

I therefore welcome the Government's commitment to review youth work qualifications and funding. I also welcome the £500,000 of bursaries for students and the level 3 youth work qualification. However, I hope that the Minister realises the scale of the task ahead of her, given the scale of the cuts and the damage that has been done to youth work as a sector. I implore her perhaps to go one step further by adopting Labour's policy of implementing a workforce development strategy to stimulate and guarantee the recruitment and employment of professional youth workers for the future.

For years, there has been a serious vacuum of leadership coming from Government. In 2016, the Cabinet Office committed to create a new three-year youth policy statement, but that promise was dropped. Now, with youth work sitting within DCMS, we have seen a renewed understanding of the benefits of youth work. We welcome the Government's commitment to produce a youth charter. However, without significant investment in this area and a clear, compelling and positive vision for young people, this will not be achieved.

Today, youth sector leaders have written to the new Prime Minister calling on the Government to provide a dedicated fund for young people. Will the Minister join their call for proper investment in services for young people ahead of the upcoming spending review, instead of sticking-plaster solutions?

Labour has a strategy to rebuild our communities and guarantee high-quality youth work in every local authority. We will put forward a bold vision that is fit for the modern age—one that brings together fragmented services, celebrates diversity of provision and can respond to the challenges facing young people today. The next Labour Government will deliver properly funded youth services, backed by new legislation. Local authorities will be responsible for setting the strategic vision for what they want to achieve, working alongside local partners and young people to shape provision in the local area and ensure sufficient access to high-quality youth work provision. Local authorities will be required to establish and facilitate the delivery of local youth partnerships, which will bring together stakeholders from across the community, including young people themselves, to map how they can best support young people's needs. That will be overseen by a strengthened national body for youth work, to ensure that such partnerships and provision is in place.

We must remember that austerity is a political choice, not an economic necessity. Our nation is the fifth richest in the world, and while axing millions from services for young people, the Tories have handed out billions of pounds in corporation tax giveaways. We will not sit back and allow the Tories to fail our young people. Instead, we must be aspirational in our outlook and recognise that, with the right support and services available, young people can realise their full potential. Ultimately, we want to build a nation for young people where they feel safe and secure and are treated fairly, supported in the present and ambitious for their future.

5.10 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak briefly, and I thank the Government for committing time to this important debate. There are one or two competing political priorities on the agenda today, but this remains a hugely important issue.

I hope the House will indulge me for a second as I seek to take my moment in history by perhaps being the first to congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), our new Prime Minister, on his appointment to the role and his barnstorming speech outside No. 10 earlier. From that speech, I took a number of positives that relate to this debate. He spoke about his commitment to education and to policing and supporting our forgotten towns, which is important to me as the Member of Parliament for the town of Mansfield. All those things flirt around the edge of this discussion about our offer for younger people and the support we give them through things like youth work, so I hope that this, too, will form a key priority for him in government.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Have you got a job yet, Ben?

Ben Bradley: Maybe now.

As vice-chair of the all-party group on youth affairs, I have looked at the role and sufficiency of youth services closely over the last year, alongside colleagues from across the House and the brilliant National Youth Agency. Access to quality youth work and services for young people is fundamental, particularly in areas of significant deprivation such as Mansfield and Warsop. The reduction in services in recent years is well documented.

The APPG on youth affairs led a year-long inquiry to understand the role that youth work plays and the impact of recent changes. We had a brilliant time visiting some fantastic services in different parts of the country. I enjoyed spending some quality time with the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle). Although we do not always find total consensus on every issue, not least the things that I just mentioned, this is probably one on which we broadly agree. We might articulate it in slightly different ways; we will find out a bit later.

It was plain to see that the quality and the existence of these services is variable at best. The fabulous multimillion-pound Myplace centres that we visited in Mansfield or the brilliant YMCA facilities that we visited in Lincolnshire contrast with tumbledown scout huts and even minibus-based youth centres in many cases. Even in my own county of Nottinghamshire, the service is hugely varied.

My takeaway, informally, has been that the accessibility and locality of these services is far more important than fancy buildings. If young people cannot reach them, they are wasted. The Garage, which the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown visited, is connected with the Garibaldi School in my constituency. Although it is literally a scout hut on the side of the road and has needed significant refurbishment recently, the fact that it is next to the school and is local, so that people can get there, makes it almost a more positive contributor to

the area, which is a particularly deprived part of my constituency, than the big, fancy Myplace centre in the middle of town.

I urge the Government to consider the possibility of linking up school facilities with youth work organisations and qualified youth workers. They need to be separate from schools, but basing those services there or nearby makes them as accessible as possible. The Shed and Vibrant Warsop are brilliant examples of how those services can be brought closer to home and into the local community. Warsop, which is a small town on the edge of Mansfield, did not have any youth services whatsoever until the voluntary sector stepped in and brought those services to the local estate, which made them much more accessible. It is a really positive scheme.

In April, the all-party group set out clear recommendations on what needs to be done. The report is detailed, and I encourage colleagues who have not had a chance to read it to get hold of a copy. It found that too many young people do not have the family support or the social networks they need to adequately support them into adulthood. Youth services can provide an important safety net for young people at risk of going down the wrong path. For too many, they are the only secure place that offers them safety and continuity.

In the UK, we are lucky to have a proud history of charities and organisations working with young people—from uniformed groups, such as scouts and girl guides, to social enterprises and local charities. I have been pleased to see Government support particularly for uniformed services and the extra funding for those services, as well as the many positive elements that my hon. Friend the Minister mentioned in the National Citizen Service.

I have met so many brilliant volunteers and youth workers in Mansfield who make a hugely positive impact on young people. I know the importance of youth workers in particular, and the importance of such intervention was absolutely clear from the inquiry. It was brought home to me recently in a panel discussion with young people, organised by the British Youth Council. We talked about the proactive and preventive approach to youth services, which is so much more effective and cost-effective than the kind of crisis management we so often find ourselves doing.

Whether it is the trusted adult who steers a young person away from gangs and violence or who provides a safe space in the community for activities that forge friendships and skills for young people to get on in life, youth workers transform lives. Providing vital early intervention services keeps people out of trouble, frankly. We have so many discussions about some of the major societal challenges we face, such as knife crime, but youth services, particularly with trusted youth workers who forge connections with young people, can have a huge impact on those issues.

In many areas, such as Mansfield, we need to do more to support youth services and ensure that especially the most vulnerable young people have access to youth workers and services. Those services can help people feel supported and less isolated. They can improve mental health, tackle loneliness and, as I have said, steer children away from gangs and crime. It is a prevention service, and as we heard today in Prime Minister's

questions, prevention is better than cure. It is better for individuals, families and communities, and for the public purse as well.

The loss of youth services can lead to significant costs—social and economic—in later years if young people do not receive support early enough. Through my own role on the Education Committee, I know the statistics on how many young people who do not get access to those services or to early intervention end up excluded or in the criminal justice system. It is very clear across all these sectors that prevention is the key. Youth services can play a key role in filling the gap in a more effective and cost-efficient way than needing expensive crisis services later on.

A key recommendation from the all-party group report was that we need clear statutory guidance that defines a minimum and protected level of youth service. I am pleased that the Government have initiated a review of that statutory guidance, with the National Youth Agency joining forces with the Local Government Association to lead on the Government consultation. I know it is due to report later in the year, and it should inform our local choices and local youth partnerships to strengthen those services. That review of what is a sufficient youth offer is very welcome and much needed. I am grateful to the Minister for securing the overdue review and renewal of youth work qualifications, which we have discussed, led by the NYA. I appreciate her update in her opening remarks on the progress on the funding for that, which I inquired about during PMQs a few weeks ago. I understood, as of a few days ago, that it was still awaiting the final sign-off. I do not know whether she can confirm that it is entirely done and sorted.

Mims Davies *indicated assent.*

Ben Bradley: The Minister is nodding, which is brilliant news. I know that the NYA will be relieved to hear that.

There needs to be a consistent understanding of the level of service, and suitable data should be available to answer the question of whether there is sufficient youth work in any particular area. For example, we do not know the sector's balance between private, public and voluntary sectors. It is important to explore the changes that have happened over the last decade and examine exactly what we have in place now before we decide whether that is good enough. The reinstatement of the NYA audit, which determined levels of local authority provision, would help us to start to understand the picture at a national level. The last of these reported back in 2008, and things have clearly changed in our provision and youth work since then.

We have witnessed a reduction from 75% to just 25% of the youth workforce holding qualifications in youth work, and we have seen a nearly two-thirds drop in the number of new youth work graduate and postgraduate students since the peak. We are now in a position where there are not enough professionals in the sector, and we need to tackle this issue. With preventive services, as with anything we are trying to reinvigorate—for instance, the recruitment of teachers or doctors—the time involved in training people and putting in place qualifications to get people into the sector can be too long. We need to be looking now at how we support those qualifications, to ensure that if the Government do go ahead with plans

for something, such as having youth workers more closely related to schools and tying those things together, we have youth workers trained and ready to deliver that. Pushing for those qualifications, and for the funding needed for their renewal, is absolutely vital.

I do not want to bang on for much longer—

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): My hon. Friend is not banging on at all; he is making an important speech, and I congratulate him on the report. On the question of qualifications and the recruitment of youth workers, I completely agree that we need well qualified youth workers, because we have lost many of them. Would he support a scheme along the lines of Teach First, Step Up to Social Work or Frontline, for example, whereby good graduates would be given fast-track training in youth work and then deployed in more challenging areas where they could do some really good work, whether on gang violence, the troubled families programme or similar issues? We need to recruit really good people and then make sure that they have the right skills to do what is quite a challenging job.

Ben Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I recognise his commitment to children and young people, particularly as a former Minister—I know that any time I take part in such a debate, he is there contributing to it, which is very welcome. I totally agree with him. Securing and renewing qualifications is vital. Any way that we can find interested, aspirational and talented young people who are capable of engaging in this sector, whether they are talented graduates or people volunteering in youth work right now, who we can perhaps fast-track through the system to ensure that we have the right skills and qualifications in place, is very welcome.

I want to highlight UK Active's proposals for opening school facilities during the summer holidays to ensure that there is provision for young people. We see spikes in so many social issues over the summer, when children are not engaged in statutory education. A huge proportion of our sports facilities, for example, are locked away behind school gates in the evenings, at weekends and during the summer holidays, which is unbelievable when we consider some of the incredible facilities available. I know that the Minister has engaged in that proposal before. I urge the Government to continue to work with UK Active to open up youth provision in the summer holidays.

I want to mention a local social enterprise called Life Skills Education, which runs a programme called DARE. There are no local colleagues in the Chamber right now, but at some stage in the past 25 years they will probably all have gone through a DARE programme. When I did it at school, it was about drug and alcohol education. My dad used to come into school on his police motorbike and we all used to go into the playground to talk about the police and what they did—it was all very exciting. That early intervention and education in schools has been revived in recent years in Nottinghamshire. Life Skills Education, which is based in my constituency, has just had a load of funding from the police and crime commissioner so that it can expand into every school in Nottinghamshire, getting in there with early intervention to deal with things such as knife crime, hate crime and the massively expanded curriculum now offered in

[Ben Bradley]

Nottinghamshire's schools. I just wanted to highlight that programme and encourage the Minister, if she gets the opportunity, to support it.

With the youth work census, which looks in detail at what services exist and how they are structured, identifies gaps and creates statutory guidance and a clearer definition of what a sufficient level of youth work actually looks like, we can ensure that youth workers and youth services can meet the needs of young people across the country.

I thank the Minister for her personal interest in and support for youth work in the APPG's inquiry. I welcome the investment she spoke about for supporting those qualifications and interventions, and the youth charter. I urge the Government currently taking shape around us this afternoon to ensure that they do all they can to support youth work, by implementing the youth work census and ensuring that we fund local services properly.

5.23 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Between January 2017 and March 2018, nine young people were killed in my constituency. Most of them died as a result of knife crime. That number represents only the very worst cases. It does not include young people who have been injured. It does not include the children being exploited, and trafficked, along county lines. It does not include the videos of teenagers driving around our local streets with their faces covered, brandishing knives and threatening violence. It does not include the fear that all these things breed in my community: the fear of parents sending their children to school; the fear of teachers with a duty of care; and the fear—real, palpable fear—of the young people themselves.

I have spoken several times in this place about knife crime and what we need to do to stop it. I have been making seven key demands of Government. Some are responsive, such as peripatetic mental health units that would help families and communities deal with the trauma of a violent attack once it has happened, but some are preventive, such as establishing new and trusted reporting systems for young people, so that we can work with young people to stop these tragedies happening.

My demand for proper youth investment is different, because youth services can do both—they can play a role in the prevention of crime as well as providing a comfortable, safe place. Spending time with a youth worker enables children to build up resilience. It allows them to test ideas and to develop coping strategies. It allows them to get support, to talk, to share and to question. When they are facing problems, a youth service helps a young person connect with agencies that can help them. Youth services can often broker that and provide trust in those agencies. Alternatively, a youth service can simply give advice from a trusted adult.

Youth services are about so much more than just fixing crime. I remember going to a youth club when I was young. It was at St John's in north Woolwich. I received validation of my rights as a young person that I did not get from anywhere else. I do not think I would have got the confidence that has eventually led to me being here without that youth service. I want to publicly and belatedly thank Esther Wilson, Anne King, Nick Nicholls and Dave Butcher. I would not have made it without them.

Youth workers provide a really important education to young people. That is not a formal, academic education, but an education in skills that are massively important. For some young people, youth clubs will be the only place where there are older people who they can trust. Those adults can help all young people to learn to interpret the world with their peers and to interact with adults, as well as providing them with role models and safe places for creativity, cultural expression and cultural exploration. They allow young people to develop so many different skills. It is what policy wonks call cultural and social capital—basically, many of the things that middle-class children hopefully take for granted.

Since 2010, we have lost so many excellent youth workers. Across this city, since the 2011-12 financial year, 104 youth centres and projects have permanently closed and a massive 562 youth workers have been put out of a job. That is a tragedy, because it has led to tragedy. That is why I am delighted that the London Borough of Newham is pursuing a huge expansion of youth services. There will be £1.4 million of investment and 33 new full-time roles—potentially the largest ever recruitment of youth workers in the UK. Our young people in Newham have been asking for that. Fortunately, the Labour Mayor and the Labour council have listened to them.

The new services will be up and ready by the end of this year, and I know they will make a huge positive difference. We only need to listen to the testimony of children to understand why. Newham parents whose children spent last summer with youth clubs and council-funded youth services said it was the best summer their children had had. One young man said:

"The youth centre was a place that they offered me support, and the only worker who didn't judge me, and actually attended all my meetings, was the youth worker. She never gave up on me, even when I gave up on myself."

Those life-changing and, I suggest, life-preserving experiences need to be available to children across the country. How about the Minister matching the Labour promise of statutory youth services in every single area, so that no child misses out? Once she does that, she must ensure she does not pass the youth service buck without the bucks to match.

5.29 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown). She reminds us that in a digital world, where more and more young people spend time with their iPads or iPods and so on—as we all increasingly do—the need for them to have exposure to situations that those of us who were brought up in an analogue world took more for granted is extraordinarily important.

I want to make some remarks about the situation for youth services today, and I thank the Minister for her enthusiasm at the Dispatch Box. As shadow skills Minister, it was particularly interesting for me to hear her talk about the establishment of a new level 3 apprenticeship in this regard. I obviously welcome that, but we need to take into account the fact that many of the people who have previously qualified as youth workers have, for the reasons that we have discussed today, simply been unable to find jobs in that area. Another genuine point I make to her is that this needs to be taken forward very carefully because what happens at levels 1 and 2—I do

not know whether the intention is to do anything preparatory in this area—is critical in getting the right sort of people to do this sort of thing.

I praise the very comprehensive speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), the shadow Minister for youth affairs. She put her finger on so many of the disappointments and failings of recent years. She gave statistics on the amount by which spending had gone down and everything else, and all this is in the context of councils having had some of the worst cuts in recent years. I think particularly of my council in Blackpool, where we have lost about £700 million of funding. I say to the Minister and her departmental colleagues—her Department also focuses significantly on seaside and coastal towns, because of tourism issues—that small unitary authorities, such as mine in Blackpool, have suffered the most from that. The heavy toll of those cuts on children's services, on social care and children's care and on the number of young people who come to towns such as Blackpool sometimes looking for the proverbial streets that are paved with gold, but finding that that is not the case, is an additional burden and challenge for my local authority. That is why I welcome what my hon. Friend said, not just today but on other occasions, about expansion.

The main purpose of youth services under a Labour Government will be to provide non-formal education through personal, social and political development. It will be absolutely clear that young people will be at the centre of determining a new statutory youth service, because the issue is the same as it is in education. Too often, young people feel and find that education is done to them, or sometimes for them, and not with them. That needs to be taken on board, whether we are talking about the National Citizen Service or any of the other initiatives that the Government have introduced.

It is also important that local councils partner locally with organisations to develop a diverse universal offer to establish and submit long-term plans for local delivery, but they can do that only if there is significant security from long-term funding. That has not been the case with Governments since 2010. There is a whole list of things, including rebuilding the workforce, long-term proportionate evaluation and so on, that we need to take forward. I hope not least that the impetus provided by the most excellent report from the all-party group on youth affairs, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), will have made waves for this Government, and will do the same for the new Government. As many have said, we wait to see the colour of their money in this area.

There has been some discussion about the value of the NCS this afternoon. Clearly, it has done some useful work for lots of people. I would cite one of my former Blackpool apprentices who took part in two or three NCS initiatives that inspired in her an interest in public affairs and a confidence that allowed her to go to work in a pressurised office environment and has now taken her on to a university degree. There are such individual examples, but, given how much money the NCS has been getting, compared with the number of young people it has delivered for, it is not the ideal solution. This needs to be taken onboard.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who is no longer in his place, and others have referred to the work that voluntary youth organisations have had to

take on because of the lack of funding. I think of uniformed groups such as the Scouts, Girl Guides, Cadets, the Woodcraft Folk, and so on. I pay tribute to the Scouts Association. I pay tribute to Ann Limb, the first woman chair of the association, who is a long-standing friend of mine, and to Matt Hyde, the chief executive, for the way they have reinvigorated and energised the association for the 21st century. I particularly praise their skills for life programme. We have talked about informal learning and inspiration. Those skills for life are precisely the sorts of enabling skills that young people need not just in school but out of school.

Tim Loughton: As one of those who helped to design the National Citizen Service, I am obviously rather protective of it. I pay tribute to Matt Hyde, as has the hon. Gentleman. The Scouts have been very supportive of the NCS, and obviously the NCS has had a lot of investment, but will he take it from me that that should not be seen as displacing investment from youth services? It is not just the cost of the project; the NCS is a recruiting tool for youth leaders of the future, including for the Scouts. The data also shows that those who have been through the NCS achieve better results at school. The payback from the investment comes over several years; it is not just about the cost of running that initially three-week summer experience.

Gordon Marsden: I entirely accept that, and I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman, who was an extraordinarily good Children's Minister. He is absolutely right to make the point about the wave effects, if I can put it that way. I am not saying that the NCS has not done good work; I am saying that it is not to be regarded as a substitute for the sort of statutory process we will need in the future.

I am very proud to be a Scout ambassador in Blackpool. I pay tribute to the Scout district commissioner, Victoria DaSilva, and to the president, an extremely formidable lady and councillor from the Minister's own party, Councillor Lily Henderson. They, and everyone in Blackpool, have expanded the Scouts in recent years. It is not all doom and gloom, therefore, but we know about the number of youth and community workers who have lost their jobs since 2008.

The situation in the careers services runs in parallel to the way in which Government have generally treated the youth service. The argument is the same. No one disputes that individual initiatives, properly carried out, can make a great difference, but they are no substitute for a long-term process, which is what we need. My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood on the Front Bench talked about the fall in the number of degrees, including graduate certificates and postgraduate diplomas, in youth work programmes. That is inevitable when people cannot find decent jobs and are not given a structure.

I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) that not every space has to be a five-star building and that it is what goes on inside that matters. Nevertheless, it is a tragedy that many of the last Labour Government's investments in decent buildings have not flourished because of post-2010 austerity. Many of those buildings could not be used for their original purpose. Before I came to this debate, I checked the dates. One of the last of those buildings was erected in Blackpool. The Oracle youth hub is a fantastic, new,

[Gordon Marsden]

modernistic building not far from my offices. Building started in November 2010. I have looked up in my local newspaper the date it was opened. It is a fantastic, dynamic building. We were told by the *Blackpool Gazette* in 2012 that the building was going to do wonderful things, but of course it has not because it has not had the money or the staff. That is a great shame, and similar situations should be avoided in future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood paid tribute to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for taking on the project. As a former Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department, however, I gently say to the Minister—to whom I mean no disrespect—that I know that DCMS has to cover a huge range of issues. I do not think things have changed that much since my day—they are probably worse, if anything—so I am sure the Minister will agree that DCMS civil servants are called on to undertake a considerable amount of work compared with those in other Departments. While DCMS takes this forward, it is important that every other Government Department, including the Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Justice, does not see it as an opportunity to say, “Oh well, DCMS is doing that.” I am sure the Minister does not need any lessons from me or, indeed, the new Secretary of State, if there is going to be a new Secretary of State, on lobbying in that regard. I gently say, however, that it is very important that DCMS should not be seen as being solely responsible for this particular area.

I want to turn briefly to the report's recommendations. They have been covered extensively, and I have no doubt that my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown will want to talk about them in due course. I want to pluck out two quotations from the report. The first is from the British Youth Council, whose executive I was a member of many years ago. It says:

“We believe properly funded youth services and agencies aid young people in their personal development and their ability to function in society.”

That is a huge issue in terms of citizenship.

The second quotation is from the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), who is the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on youth affairs. In comments that echo those made by others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, she said:

“we lack a coherent approach to secure and sustain youth work, and a proper understanding of the levels and extent of youth work needed to achieve the best outcomes for young people.”

I want to close with two or three examples of what has been done on the ground in Blackpool in recent years. Last year I met a group of HeadStart apprentices; that is a Big Lottery-funded agency programme providing resilience for young people across Blackpool, particularly in mental health areas, and it does a fantastic job. It gives the apprentices themselves a varied and creative programme to qualify in, while helping empower hundreds of young people in Blackpool schools and also on a one-to-one basis and in conjunction with local charities such as mine. It has been doing things just in the last month. Blackpool's Talbot road has been made into the country's first resilience pathway. That pathway illustrates 42 different moves in life that might help young people

and their families and friends to find a sense of belonging, and it was put together by young people in Blackpool themselves. Each paving stone is designed to represent an idea or suggestion that helps young people and their families and friends find a sense of belonging, and I am glad to say that that has received some funding from the Lancashire enterprise partnership.

I also want to touch on the fantastic work done by young carers in Blackpool; they need to be highlighted because they too are acquiring skills at a time when they are having also to attend school. I also want to highlight the Blackpool Youth Council and the body that organises the annual elections for it, URPotential, and to praise particularly Debbie Terras, the previous chief executive, who did a fantastic job and brought people from Blackpool on two occasions to this place to participate in activities here.

I mentioned at the beginning of my speech the number of young people who come to Blackpool and find themselves in disarray not just with housing but with other issues as well, and I also want to mention our local charity the Streetlife Trust, whose chief executive Jane Hugo is now one of my councillors in a ward in the centre of town.

Finally, I want to talk about the work of the Blackpool Boys and Girls Club and its youth worker, Dave Blacker, who has worked for 43 years with the club. Its most recent initiative is an exhibition. We have had some problems with vandalism in our key park, Stanley Park, and those young people have put together an exhibition of their thoughts and images about that. Elaine Smith, doyenne and chair of Stanley Park, said it is all too easy to look at young people in the park and wonder if they are up to no good and that the exhibition

“shows that so many of our children really do care.”

We have a lot to be thankful for from initiatives in Blackpool started by individuals, and I am reminded of the old song “Sisters are doin' it for themselves”; young people are doing it for themselves, but they should not have to do it all on their own, and there should be a proper statutory youth service to go with this.

5.47 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for this debate. I rise as the chair of the all-party group on youth affairs who produced this report with my vice-chair the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and my former vice-chair the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan). Our travels up and down the country visiting youth centres in many constituencies played an important role and helped to provide the basis of this report.

I rise also as someone who worked in my local youth service when I left school at 16. I worked at the National Youth Agency, which of course helped to produce the report, and then spent four years in Brussels at the European Youth Forum. I was also a voluntary group leader in my local Woodcraft Folk, then national chair in the Youth Parliament, and I, too, served on the board of the British Youth Council. I could therefore say that I am steeped in this subject and it flows through my veins, but that does not mean that that I just biasedly think it is fantastic. That is why we tried to base the report on the evidence that we received—over 100 pieces of evidence came in—and the visits we undertook.

When I joined Parliament and became chair of the APPG, I was deeply concerned that the opportunities that I had, the safety nets that we heard about from other hon. Members and the spaces that supported us growing up had started to wither away. It is now nine years since Parliament looked at these issues, and in that time the youth portfolio has been in three different Government Departments. With the National Youth Agency, we agreed to initiate the report, and we applied for a Backbench Business debate on the subject. I am rather pleased that the Minister has stolen the Backbench Business debate that the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and I applied for and that was due to take place tomorrow, because I think it shows that she will treat this issue with some importance and that Government time has been scheduled for it. I hope this is a sign that the Minister will keep her role. I will not give her my total backing, because that would probably undermine her if she wanted a job in the future, but I will say that she has shown a real regard for youth services that we perhaps have not seen previously. I intend no offence to previous Ministers, because the portfolio is huge, but her showing an understanding of youth has been really welcome. I also welcome today's announcement that 3,000 young people will be given opportunities in sports, that there will be £500,000 in student bursaries for 400 students on the apprenticeship programme, that the youth charter will be produced and, most important, that we will have a review of statutory youth provision and what that means.

I will quickly rattle through some of the key findings of the APPG report, then offer some personal reflections on where the sector is now. Our first recommendation was that there should be a Minister responsible for the portfolio focused on young people. As I have said, to be effective, the Minister needs to give greater priority to youth work and youth services, and I think that she has done that. However, she is currently the Minister for Sport and Civil Society and has responsibility not only for youth but for gambling, horse-racing, lotteries and loneliness. Yes, these things are interconnected, but the reality is that a Minister with responsibility for children and young people who can focus on that area and the interconnectedness across Government is desperately needed. It is not only our APPG that has made this point; others dealing with different parts of the journey of a child have also done so.

Tim Loughton: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his report. He and I attended the same school, with just a few years in between us. What he has just suggested as his No. 1 recommendation was actually the case some seven years ago, when the youth brief was within the Department for Education as part of the children and families brief. As a result, we produced the "Positive for Youth" report in 2011, which was the most comprehensive policy document of proposals on an integrated youth policy involving the statutory sector, the charity sector and the business sector. So we are only trying to reinvent the wheel here.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: A lot of this report is about either reinventing the wheel or looking back into the past and seeing what we can learn from the positive things. Always, while going forward we must know our history. I would say that the hon. Gentleman was one of the best children and youth Ministers that we have had

in a Conservative Government in recent history. He should be very pleased with the work that he did when he was a Minister, and his departure was a great shame. That is the past, but we can learn from some of the good things that happened.

Our report also says that there needs to be greater investment in youth work and a commitment to support for youth services in the next comprehensive spending review. There is no purpose in talking about nice, positive little programmes here and little grants there that do not scratch the surface unless, as we have heard already, there is a decent strategic commitment to funding as part of a long-term Government funding review. We call for further research to determine what the benefit-cost ratio would need to be to ensure that open access youth services and appropriate long-term funding are provided.

Our next point is that the Government should introduce a clear statutory duty and guidance to define the minimum protected level of service. Councils do have a statutory duty to provide some youth activities, but the guidance on what "some youth activities" means is so weak that a horse and cart can be driven through it. It can effectively mean that we could have a local youth football club playing once a week in the local park and that is it. I welcome the Government's commitment to review the guidance, but we really need not just a review, but clear directions that outcomes must be significantly better than we have at the moment.

Youth provision is disappearing across the country due to cuts, but the truth is that we do not even know the state of services after all those cuts, because we have not had an audit of local authority provision since the coalition Government. We urgently need a census, an audit or whatever—I am not precious. Such a thing used to happen once a year, but it could happen once every cycle—whatever the cycle is. We need to know where we stand with a census of local authority youth work. There is a mantra: "Unless you measure it, you can't deliver it." Until we measure the situation and audit it, we will not be able to assess where we are failing young people. I welcome the Minister's responsibilities, but they must come with that auditing process.

We also recommended that each local authority should confirm a lead role responsible for the discharge of the statutory duty for youth work. Again, if local councils have a statutory duty but do not appoint a person who is responsible for delivering on that duty, it is almost impossible to hold them to account. Youth work is not a voluntary provision, because it has statutory underpinning. Although it is poorly defined, local authorities must show that they are discharging that duty. We recommended that the position should be probably equivalent to a deputy director of children's services in the responsible local authority, which are upper-tier authorities, and they should be accountable for the duty, ensuring that council officers fully take charge.

Finally, the inquiry recommended that the Government should develop a youth workforce strategy, including the expectations for the ratio of professional youth workers, trainers and volunteers. We need a standardised national system to evaluate the sufficiency and suitability of youth services and the quality of youth work provision. That, of course, is where the National Youth Agency comes in.

We are currently relying on the NYA to oversee standards, qualifications, access, safeguarding and youth workforce development in the sector. Until last week, it

[Lloyd Russell-Moyle]

did that without any Government funding. Prior to the coalition Government, the NYA had an annual budget of £10 million. Almost overnight, however, funding disappeared entirely, and it has done a tremendous job in the most difficult circumstances. It has had to limit not only the services that it is able to offer to councils, but voluntary services, too, and it has had to rely on private endowments, fees, and Canada and Australia, which continue to pay the NYA for the accreditation of their youth services. It should be a national scandal that a national institution designed to keep our young people safe was defunded in such a way, and that we have had to rely on the kindness, in effect, of Commonwealth countries to continue funding a service offered here in Britain. Although I am pleased that the Minister has said there will be some commitment to the National Youth Agency in some of the workforce reviews, £800,000 is too little compared with where we were, and it is definitely too late for the young people who have missed out on opportunities.

Part of the NYA's role was to provide the audit I mentioned of youth services around the country—something that was lost when its funding went. That needs to be urgently reinstated, and I hope the Minister will either find resources from her Department or push the Treasury to sufficiently fund not only blanket audits but the ability to do one-off spot checks—sometimes we can address these issues by picking up where we think there are problems and by delving in. In over five years, Ofsted has not inspected any youth provision in this country; it is entitled to do that, and we could encourage it to do so to make sure that the fulfilment is there.

There can be no question but that youth services improve the lives of young people. They offer young people experiences outside formal education; they support, but do not replace, formal education; and they enhance readiness for learning in the classroom and learning in life. That is why professional qualifications for youth workers are so important. My ten-minute rule Bill early last year aimed to put youth work qualifications on a statutory footing. That, of course, does not devalue the work of current programmes such as the apprenticeship programme, which will hopefully come on stream—the Government have approved it, albeit late, but better late than never—and university programmes such as the fantastic one at the University of Brighton in my constituency, which ensures that our children and young people are supported by the people best qualified to understand their emotional and educational wellbeing.

We should be under no illusion about the dire state of youth work at the moment. I have been in and out of this sector most of my life. As in any sector, there is politics, with the voluntary sector having arguments with the professional sector, and at one point or another everyone falls out. However, what is remarkable now is that the sector—the youth workers, the voluntary organisations, the scouts and the guides—are saying almost with one voice that there is a crisis in many of our young people's lives and we need to step up to support them. Those organisations are campaigning for the survival of much of the sector.

The Government must be held to account. Multiple youth work programmes have now closed their doors to new applicants across country. We have had the closure

of 763 youth centres. Some 4,500 youth workers have lost their jobs, and their posts have been deleted. That has led to 140,000 places providing young people with access to youth services being lost. The sector is on its knees, and Members should not take my word for it. Research from the House of Commons Library shows that funding went from £1.2 billion in 2010 to £358 million in 2017. That is a 68% cut in cash terms, and almost £1 billion in real terms stripped from the sector. Many parts of the country now have no youth services at all provided through statutory provision.

So stark is the sense of bereftness felt by young people that 16 to 24-year-olds are now the largest demographic to feel lonely, with one in 10 saying they always or often feel lonely—far more than among the over-65s, whom we often associate with loneliness. When young people do reach out for help, those in my city alone can face a wait of 12 months to see a professional for their mental health, which then spirals down. In the very worst cases, as in my city in only the last few months, we see young people committing suicide. The Government need to take young people seriously.

In all societies, we have had people in the community who have supported us during transitions in our lives—at different points, we will all go through difficult transitions. Historically, since humanity began, that person may have been the village elder, the local imam or the local vicar. Having someone to help us with that process is vital. Youth workers were there to help young people make that transition. Quite rightly, at the turn of the last century, we moved away from a link between Church and state. We developed a professionalised programme, into which safeguarding was embedded, and we made sure that provision was based on need, not on a person's religion. However, we have destroyed much of the provision that took the place of the role played by other bodies, and we have not replaced it with anything. We have not replaced it with community endeavour, because communities are facing other huge cuts.

That is not to say that there is no voluntary provision. I visited Wigan OnSide youth zone; we are hoping to get an OnSide centre in Brighton, and some great ones are opening up in London. There, we see qualified youth workers doing good, old-fashioned youth work, and it transforms communities, but this provision is not perfect, because it is city-centre-based. What we need in every community is voluntary engagement with young people, so that they have something to do, somewhere to go, and someone to speak to. Parents might be the best to love young people, but we need professional engagement to support young people through the difficult moments in their life.

I am pleased that the Government will introduce a charter, but will we make sure that every young person has somewhere to go, something to do and someone to speak to? If we do not, it can come as no surprise when knife crime and antisocial behaviour increase, and when county lines ravage our communities—although youth work will not in itself solve those issues. When cuts in social services, policing and youth work all come together, the result is communities bereft of support. There is a phrase in *"The Shopkeeper's Journal"*: "You break it, you own it." The reality is that this Government—not councils—defunded youth services. They broke it; they must fix it.

6.6 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): It gives me great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), who is such an expert and has done so much work in this field. I shall speak about our experience of youth work and youth services in a corner of north Derbyshire.

Last September, I visited Fairfield youth club, the only evening youth club left in our rural community. There were 60 or so young people there, having fun, chatting, and engaging with the staff. They wanted to make a video with me. They asked if I would interview them about what they wanted for their area and their hopes for the future. Once the camera was on them and I was asking questions, those young people opened up in a way that I will never forget. They spoke about their youth centre and youth club as a safe place to go. Their friends had fallen prey to the drug gangs, and it was the only place out of the house where they could go and feel safe.

Even in High Peak, our beautiful rural corner of Derbyshire, we have drug gangs preying on young people who are hanging around, as young people do when they have nowhere to go and nothing to do. I spoke to all our headteachers of secondary schools shortly before the end of term, and they highlighted to me how concerned they were about the summer holidays and about the preying on young people that they had already seen in term time. Parents would phone them up, worried about whether they should pay a drug debt for their child. Drug gangs would give a child drugs and tell them to sell them to their friends and would then come seeking the money. There were young people, often from ordinary middle-class families, owing £1,000 in drug debt, and being told that their bodies would be smashed if they or their parents did not pay. That is what we see, unfortunately, and I am sure that my area is far from being different from other places, especially ones that border large cities.

At the same time as all that, under universal credit, we have seen parents with children, the youngest of whom was 12, forced to seek work full time for 35 hours a week, regardless of school holidays. I have spoken to Save the Children about the threat to our young people and their safety and security. The other week, I spoke to a parent whose children are 12 and eight years old. She was told that she could go out to work and leave her 12-year-old in charge of her eight-year-old throughout the summer holidays. If that is the sort of advice parents are being given by a Government agency, what hope do our children have?

We are not only seeing the decimation of support services. In Derbyshire, not only has every youth worker been given redundancy, but hundreds of early-help support workers for families have disappeared, as have our sexual health clinics, where so many young people could go when they disclose sexual abuse. We have seen our school nurses halved and our police force halved. At the same time as all that, parents are told that they should be out looking for work full time and leaving young people alone.

We have been desperate for summer holiday provision, which used to be provided by our youth services but is no longer. We no longer even have youth clubs that the county council provides statutorily. We used to have

eight or nine youth workers locally, and 80 throughout Derbyshire; the number has gone down to eight across the entire county. Those places left are for supporting voluntary groups and parents who set up clubs and voluntary provision. That is fine, but as has been pointed out, voluntary groups often cannot provide the continuity and the sort of support that youth workers can give.

The youth workers in my area have been instrumental in supporting young people with the disclosure of sexual abuse, to deal with disability and mental health issues and to resist the drugs gangs that prey on them. That is not a job that we can ask volunteers to do. We have some wonderful voluntary groups. I pay tribute to parents, a wonderful group of whom set up a Monday-night youth club in Chinley, a village in my constituency. They see 80 or 90 young people come from all across the area because there is nothing else on.

We have sports teams, and we have Beavers, Cubs, Scouts, Brownies, Guides and Sea Scouts. There are some fantastic activities going on and a real wealth of provision for some young people, but such activities often cost money. Cubs and Scouts costs £30 for a term, and often more for different trips. There are sports clubs on the private finance initiative-provided playing fields, but it costs £6 or £7 a night to play football. That is not something that parents on a low income can pay. The most vulnerable young people often feel that they cannot take part in guided activities and are not prepared to do that.

Young people often want to hang out. We have some brilliant youth centres, which were provided next to our parks, in exactly the place where young people want to hang out and to get a bit of support as well. When I spent a day in one of my local secondary schools, I spoke to some year 9s—they were 13 and 14-year-olds—and said, “What do you want from your area? What do you want from your politicians?” Their answer was that they wanted a covered bench so that they had somewhere to sit that was out of the rain—so that they could sit and chat with their friends and not get wet. It is not very much to ask.

In the same town, there is a youth centre right next to the park. It was exactly what young people needed. It used to provide youth services on a Tuesday and Friday night. Young people could run in and out, talk to the staff, get a drink, have fun and get support at the same time. That is exactly the sort of provision we need. We have the buildings there, but they are mothballed—they are not in use anymore—and the staff have just been given redundancy notices. Staff with years of experience who are trusted among young people across our communities are, with very heavy hearts, having to give up the jobs that they loved and believed in.

We need our young people to have such support. I am delighted to hear the Minister say that she will put in place more statutory guidelines and that she wants the UK to be the best place in which young people can grow up, but I am afraid that one of our youth workers told me the other week that it is a terrible time to be both a young person in Derbyshire and a youth worker. This is tough not just on our young people, but on the people who work with them. It takes years to build not just the apprenticeships, but the experience and dedication of those members of staff. At the moment, we are seeing their skills and that dedication put on the scrapheap.

[*Ruth George*]

This Government need urgently to put in place long-term, funded, ring-fenced statutory provision for young people before we see any more suffer and made vulnerable.

I am providing a summer school for 16 to 24-year-olds this week. It has been a real honour to interact with those young people, to hear about their hopes and dreams and to get them planning and campaigning on what they want to do. They will be out tomorrow in one of our local towns, holding a drop-in for young people to talk about politics, to register to vote, to get involved and to have a say. As Members of Parliament, that is something that we can all do. Young people want to be able to change things, but they are left powerless. We can put power into their hands. We can give them the support that they need. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) spoke very movingly about the support that she had that enabled her to get to where she is today. That is what we need to do for all our young people, and I hope that the Government will not just listen but act.

6.16 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I am glad that we have had the opportunity to debate the positive impact that youth services have on our young people. Youth centres provide young people with safe spaces in which to learn, develop trusted relationships, build friendships and develop interpersonal skills. They should be at the heart of our communities, but, sadly, after nearly a decade of austerity, many parts of our country have no recognisable youth services at all.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) for his persistence in securing this debate. He is chair of the all-party group on youth affairs, which recently conducted a parliamentary inquiry into youth services. He spoke eloquently about his areas of expertise, which are wide and varied, and I learned a lot from him. He also spoke about the importance of evidence and why he was involved in this work. I hope that the Minister responds positively to his recommendations, and I look forward to her response.

We also heard a number of very passionate speeches. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) who spoke passionately about knife crime, the impact of trauma on our communities and how youth services can help in prevention, building resilience and ensuring that our children have trusted adults to whom they can go to be connected with the relevant agencies.

We also had a passionate speech from my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George), who spoke emotively about Fairfield youth club in her constituency and about how, when she spoke to young people there, they spoke of the need for a safe space and how, sadly, this club was their only safe place and the only way to keep them out of the grips of the local gangs.

Many other Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), mentioned the importance of youth work in tackling youth violence. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), who is my neighbour and friend, talked about the impact of losing a young person's life—Jay Hughes—on the local community and the role that youth work can play in rebuilding that community.

My hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) and for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) also mentioned those points. The great role that NCS plays was mentioned by the Minister and the hon. Members for Crawley (Henry Smith) and for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) made some positive points about the scheme but also asked some questions, which leads me on to a few issues on which I wish to touch.

Currently, 95% of all Government spending on youth services goes to the NCS, despite the fact that only one in 10 eligible young people participate in its programmes. Since it was established, the NCS has received £1.5 billion, and it spent £10 million on a brand refresh earlier this year. Let that sink in. This is alongside a landscape in which spending on youth services has fallen by 70%, 760 youth centres have closed their doors and over 14,000 youth workers have lost their jobs in the last decade. Surely, it is unsustainable to spend millions of pounds on a programme that is simply not attracting the numbers when there are hundreds of brilliant youth centres and talented youth workers crying out for funding across the country.

The hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) quoted the APPG's report and spoke about the importance of family support into adulthood, youth work being one of the only safe spaces for young people and why we need trusted youth workers. He also pointed out that there are not enough professionals in the sector and mentioned the importance of early intervention. I agree with all those points.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South spoke about the impact of cuts to council funding and pointed out that Blackpool Council is losing £700 million. He also mentioned the overall negative impact of these cuts on all the services that interact with young people.

Labour is absolutely committed to rebuilding the youth sector to ensure that it is fit for the modern age—a youth sector that has open access, is diverse and has the interests of young people at heart. I remember chatting with the chief executive officer of UK Youth about consulting young people on the kind of programmes they wanted to see. After she had got feedback from lots of young people, UK Youth put on a course called “Money for Life”, which focused on budgeting and money management. The organisation was concerned that no one would turn up, but it was inundated with young people. That just shows how important is to have young people at the heart of designing youth work. We need to ensure that the programmes we create are relevant to them.

Labour is also committed to ensuring that our youth services respond to the unique challenges that young people face. Youth centres should be safe spaces for every young person, where they can speak to adults they trust and who have built up relationships with them over time. Trauma-informed training will be necessary to ensure that youth workers are equipped to deal with the various issues and challenges that young people face today.

Before I end my remarks, I have several questions for the Minister. Successful grantees of the Government's youth endowment fund will need to demonstrate their plans to spend £100,000 or more by March 2020. This

freezes out small charities from the outset, setting some of our brilliant grassroots organisations up for failure. Does the Minister agree? If not, can she outline exactly how the youth endowment fund will support small charities? In what ways have the Government consulted young people to ensure that the youth endowment fund is directed to the right organisations and projects? Do they have any plans for any potential underspend from successful grantees of the fund?

We all know—it has been said many times in this Chamber—that 3 to 6 pm is a particularly dangerous time for young people, so do the Government have plans to provide youth work during those hours as part of their public health strategy to tackle violence and keep young people safe? What date will the Government publish their review of the statutory youth guidance? We have talked about it many times, but there still does not seem to be a date for this. What work is the Minister doing to ensure that youth services receive adequate funding in the upcoming spending review? Barnardo's and the Children's Society estimate that this funding needs to be around £3 billion.

UK Youth and other leading youth bodies wrote to the new Prime Minister today asking him to make Britain the best country in the world to be young. Will the Minister call on the new Prime Minister to back the asks in that letter—in particular, to unlock the £50 million NCS underspend and deliver a 10-year spending commitment to the first ever youth charter? Our young people are fantastic, but to reach their potential, they need to be given the right opportunities. It is vital that fully funded youth services are part of that picture—services that are varied, accessible and fit for the modern age. Following his speech yesterday, if the new Prime Minister wants to be known as a dude and not a dud, he could start with our youth services, making sure that they are delivered locally with a universal offer and diverse provision and established with and for our young people. So dude, don't under-deliver. We need action, not rhetoric.

6.25 pm

Mims Davies: With the leave of the House, I will close this debate for the Government, and it is a pleasure to do so. I thank hon. Members for such a passionate and informed debate. Let me repeat that the all-party group has done outstanding work on its report. I will, and we will, fully consider all its recommendations, and all the contributions made by Members today. I think that we do need to look at the workforce strategy. We need to make sure that we have a formal response to the report. I am delighted to hear that UK Youth has written to the new Prime Minister today. I do not want to give away secrets at the Dispatch Box, but I very much encouraged it to do so, so I am delighted that it has undertaken that.

As we have seen from the passionate speeches around the Chamber, there is absolutely a need to consider this report. The message from this debate is that we need somewhere to go in talking about youth work and our young people. We need to offer the opportunity that comes through the youth charter. I am delighted with the way that the sector has got to grips with supporting that. As we have heard, we are committed to the revision of the youth work qualifications, the bursary programme and the revision of the guidance for local authorities. That has met with warm support, but I absolutely recognise that many Members around the Chamber feel

that it is just the start. On the issue of youth loneliness, the new policies that will come into place later this year, I hope, will have a focus on our young people—on our care leavers, on our young carers and on people who need further support.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who is no longer in his place, talked about fast-track opportunities to get into youth service. The role of the NCS is extraordinarily valuable and important. The opportunity to bring people into this realm is a chance to give back through NCS—a great way to explore. Talking of exploring, it is very important for us to look at the future underspend in the NCS. I would personally love to see it directed towards detached youth services. I would welcome, as anybody would, more funding going that way, but obviously we will have to wait and see. The NCS is delivering a more confident, capable group of young people. We want that for all our young people, and it is absolutely right that we focus on that.

The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) spoke about long-term funding, which is what the youth endowment fund is about. It is absolutely right that we look at the 10-year plan—and that is exactly what it is—on top of the £22 million early intervention plan. On the joined-up approach, it is absolutely right that we link up with our communities and schools. Our schools know where the young people who are going to be at risk are at the end of the day—from 3 pm to 6 pm, after school. It is therefore absolutely right that we use the opportunities and understanding that our schools have.

The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) made an emotional speech. I understand what she said; my goddaughter lives in a rural community in Derbyshire. I do not want anyone to feel, from talking to young people, that it is a terrible time to be young. That is not where we want to be. The innovation and opportunities in this sphere should reach everyone, wherever they live. I hope that, through the additional £16 million in the rural services delivery grant for local authorities, we can give hope to young people. As we have heard, we need to balance the urban, rural and coastal challenges. The Government have a proud record of putting more money into coastal communities, supporting 295 projects nationwide with £174 million since 2012.

I want to talk about the youth charter. The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) spoke about the importance of youth positivity and not needing to reinvent the wheel. He asked about where we are with the NYA on the evaluation of current youth work. That is ongoing between us and the Department for Education, and no final decision has been made, but his plea has been heard.

It is true that there has been a challenge regarding our youth services. Local authorities are responsible for assessing local needs, and we have given them flexibility to make decisions. As we have heard today, where we use innovation, our community and our understanding of it, we can get things right and do things better.

We heard from the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) that this is not just about ping-pong, but I would like to look at ping-pong, because the Brighton Table Tennis Club in the constituency of the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown is fantastic. I have never been to a youth centre or youth club that

[Mims Davies]

does not have table tennis, and I would like to praise that one in particular. It works with a pupil referral unit and with people with dementia. There are fantastic, elite table tennis players. There are people who suffer loneliness and isolation, and it is table tennis that has brought them together. That just shows how services can be innovative and welcoming by opening up their facilities. Through the loneliness fund, we have ensured that local facilities are available for people to come to and feel welcome in.

I want to pick up on a point made by the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown). If we are lucky, we can look back to a teacher, youth worker, mentor or grandparent who told us that we matter and that we had chances and opportunities. We must ensure that we use our opportunities to give confidence to our young people—not to talk them down but to give them the skills and opportunities to move forward. I am delighted to hear about the extra £1.4 million in her constituency, which is being used wisely to support young people. We need to look at the basic level of sufficiency and how we are ensuring that our young people are not at risk and are safeguarded.

Lyn Brown: I thank the Minister for recognising what the London Borough of Newham is doing, despite the financial restraints, but I gently say that £1.4 million is very difficult for my local council to find. We collectively need to find ways of funding local government to fund local youth services, otherwise there will not be the people I had in my constituency to help young people through the difficulties they face.

Mims Davies: Absolutely. A strong economy, working with communities and using all the tools we have—including, for example, social impact bonds and our dormant assets—to fund our local communities, is vital.

As someone who has young girls growing up, I want to reiterate the importance of a youth voice in this policy area and the youth charter. We know what it was like when we grew up, but we have heard today that it is very different for young people growing up now. Members have asked why the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is the right place for youth policy. I think it really is the right place, but I will not be ungrateful to the rest of Government, who we have hauled in to speak to about amplifying and recognising where we are all working together. We have three youth voice projects: the youth voice steering group, which sits in civil society; the young inspectors group; and our new digital solutions group. It is right that we engage with our young people and listen to them, to ensure that these policies are right for them.

I do not think anyone can deny the challenge of serious violence and the fact that we need to make sure our young people stay safe on our streets. I am personally delighted to make sure that we have more police on our streets, and the Home Secretary—I am not quite sure who it is right now—will, I hope, be following through on this.

I am very proud to have heard from so many Members across the House about the importance of our young people. I say again that this Government are determined to support all our young people in reaching their full

potential and in giving them skills and opportunities. We truly do want this to be the best place in the world to be young, and I am determined that my Department will make that so.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the role and sufficiency of youth services.

PETITIONS

Ceasefire in Yemen

6.35 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Mr Speaker, it is a great honour to have you in the Chair at the time of the presentation of petitions on the issue of Yemen. The petition calls for the Government to pursue an immediate ceasefire in Yemen. Following my presentation, a number of other colleagues—the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman)—will also present petitions on this very important subject. Despite the peace process, humanitarian aid agencies are struggling to reach those who desperately need support. We hope that we will use our position as the penholder on Yemen at the UN to bring about an immediate ceasefire.

The petition states:

The petition of Residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Yemen is the world's worst humanitarian situation, where over 91,000 people have been killed in the war in Yemen, a further 24.1 million need humanitarian assistance and over 14 million are on the brink of starvation; further that the Court of Appeal decision of June 20th 2019 deemed arms-exports licences to Saudi Arabia as 'unlawful'.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to pursue an immediate ceasefire in Yemen, the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement, and to honour the decision of the Court of Appeal;

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002498]

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I pay tribute to the chair of the all-party group on Yemen, the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who has done so much to bring the cause of Yemen to this House, and to make sure that it is not forgotten, that the people of Yemen are remembered in this House and that action is taken to protect them.

I am very grateful to my constituents, who came at very short notice to my office to sign this petition. They include a Yemeni family who, when they heard about it, went and found other Yemenis to come and sign the petition. They want to make sure that as much as possible can be done for those still suffering in the situation in Yemen at the moment.

The petition states:

The petition of Residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Yemen is the world's worst humanitarian situation, where over 91,000 people have been killed in the war in Yemen, a further 24.1 million need humanitarian assistance and over 14 million

are on the brink of starvation; further that the Court of Appeal decision of June 20th 2019 deemed arms-exports licences to Saudi Arabia as 'unlawful'.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to pursue an immediate ceasefire in Yemen, the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement, and to honour the decision of the Court of Appeal;

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002507]

Mr Speaker: It is very good to observe that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has beetled back into the Chamber. I am bound to say that I felt almost discombobulated by his temporary absence. I am fortified by his return, as will be the House, which will now hear him present his petition on the same important matter.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Speaker; you are always kind, but tonight you are most kind.

It is a pleasure to introduce this petition on behalf of my constituents. I thank the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for bringing it forward. The conditions of those in Yemen have been a key issue for this House.

The petition, which I and my constituents in Strangford support from the bottom of our hearts, states:

The petition of Residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Yemen is the world's worst humanitarian situation, where over 91,000 people have been killed in the war in Yemen, a further 24.1 million need humanitarian assistance and over 14 million are on the brink of starvation; further that the Court of Appeal decision of June 20th 2019 deemed arms-exports licences to Saudi Arabia as 'unlawful'.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to pursue an immediate ceasefire in Yemen, the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement, and to honour the decision of the Court of Appeal;

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002499]

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to join in this cross-party presentation of petitions relating to the situation in Yemen. It used to be said that the crisis in Yemen was a forgotten war. Thanks to the cross-party efforts of Members who are speaking today, and others who are not here with us, we have ensured that it is not forgotten in this place. I am particularly pleased to present this petition from Liverpool Friends of Yemen and others.

The petition states:

The petition of Residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Yemen is the world's worst humanitarian situation, where over 91,000 people have been killed in the war in Yemen, a further 24.1 million need humanitarian assistance and over 14 million are on the brink of starvation; further that the Court of Appeal decision of June 20th 2019 deemed arms-exports licences to Saudi Arabia as 'unlawful'.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to pursue an immediate ceasefire in Yemen, the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement, and to honour the decision of the Court of Appeal;

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002506]

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): Mr Speaker, I appreciate you allowing both petitions in my name to be presented at the same time. The first petition relates to the ongoing dismal humanitarian situation in Yemen. I am sincerely grateful to all those members of the public who have signed it, and I hope that we can continue to work together with the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen, many of the non-governmental organisations that are active in the region and the United Nations to bring about peace to such a war-torn part of the middle east.

The petition states:

The petition of Residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Yemen is the world's worst humanitarian situation, where over 91,000 people have been killed in the war in Yemen, a further 24.1 million need humanitarian assistance and over 14 million are on the brink of starvation; further that the Court of Appeal decision of June 20th 2019 deemed arms-exports licences to Saudi Arabia as 'unlawful'.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to pursue an immediate ceasefire in Yemen, the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement, and to honour the decision of the Court of Appeal;

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002505]

Driving Test Centre in Dunfermline

6.43 pm

Douglas Chapman: This petition has been signed by over 160 petitioners from my constituency. They are very concerned that the Department for Transport, through its agency the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency, has been trying to diminish the opportunity for learner drivers to have their driving test carried out in their own community through the driving test centre in Dunfermline. Travelling elsewhere to be tested would add time and a huge cost for many younger drivers, their parents and driving school instructors alike. I have been keen to support the campaign as Dunfermline has a growing population and we should be securing as many key services that would be commensurate with a vibrant, growing town.

The petition states:

The petition of Residents of Dunfermline & West Fife,

Declares that there is a clear demand for a Driving Test Centre to remain in Dunfermline.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Her Majesty's Government to work with the DVSA to ensure a long-term arrangement is secured to retain the Driving Test Centre in Dunfermline with an adequate level of service provision to meet current and future demand.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002504]

Road Safety outside Wingate Primary School

6.45 pm

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): This petition has been organised by the pupils of Wingate Primary School and relates to the road safety issues outside of the school. The children there have acquired more than 200 signatures from all the pupils, the teachers and a fair share of the local community.

[Phil Wilson]

The petition states:

The petition of Community of Wingate Primary School,

Declares that safer roads for children are essential and that the roads outside Wingate Primary School should be made more safe.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that the roads outside Wingate Primary School are made safer for its pupils and other people in the community.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002503]

Water Safety and Life-saving Equipment

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

6.46 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank Mr Speaker for granting me this debate and allowing me to highlight an issue that has been prominent in my constituency and those of many other Members who have come along this evening. Drownings are sadly all too common. We hear today of a body being recovered in London, as happened recently in the Speirs Wharf area of the constituency of the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney). Our hearts go out to all the families who have lost loved ones to drowning.

Given the scorching temperatures outside, many people will be tempted to go into the water without realising the risks that involves, so I highlight the Royal Lifesaving Society's summer water safety campaign. We need to all look out for one another in those circumstances and ensure as much as we can that those messages are shared with all our constituents wherever we have open water, or rivers or even large ponds, in our constituencies. People need to understand the risks they are taking.

Concerns have been raised for some time in Glasgow about damage to lifelbelts and life ropes particularly, but not exclusively, on the banks of the River Clyde, which runs through my constituency. Life-saving equipment is regularly being removed, damaged and otherwise tampered with. In response, Glasgow City Council's water safety working group has launched a campaign, "Taking a lifebelt is taking a life". Only a week after the launch and of signs being affixed to the lifebelt posts in the city, the *Evening Times* reported that some of the signs themselves had been vandalised. Andy Waddell, the chairman of Glasgow's water safety working group, said:

"People who vandalise the lifelbelts along the Clyde need to be fully aware of the potentially lethal consequences of their actions. That anyone would seek to destroy a safety message intended to protect lives is truly mind-boggling."

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. I spoke to her today about this issue, but I want to make her aware of a similar circumstance in my constituency. She might not be aware that the lifelbelts in Killyleagh harbour have been tampered with on a number of occasions. Does she agree that further steps have to be taken to ensure that such safety equipment is not tampered with, since the unavailability of lifelbelts could lead to death? There is the prospect that fines are not enough. Indeed, fines and penalties for such behaviour should be legally binding—perhaps the Minister can respond to that—and of such severity that people will think twice before destroying lifelbelts, which could end up leading to someone dying when they just did not have to.

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman's point, and I sympathise with those being affected by the issue in his constituency. It is a widespread occurrence, and it seems to be happening across these islands. We need to do more about that.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate on water safety, since many of us feel strongly

about the issue. In my constituency, there have been fatalities in the Jubilee river. I have raised that issue with the Prime Minister no less during Prime Minister's questions. In this regard, I commend Slough Borough Council. Working with its partners the Environment Agency, Thames Valley police and Royal Berkshire fire and rescue, it has installed safety signage warning people about the dangers of swimming in the river, given the strong undercurrents, and the effects of cold-water shock even during the summer months. Does the hon. Lady agree that while life-saving equipment should not be tampered with, the Government have simply been too slow to implement an effective and sufficient water safety education programme?

Alison Thewliss: I agree with that, and I think there is a lot more to be said for co-ordination of action and for making sure that more happens and there is not a piecemeal approach to water safety around the UK.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Tragically, over Easter we lost five people in York's rivers. In York we continue to have one of the highest levels of river deaths in the country. On Saturday, I had the privilege of going out with York Rescue Boat, a voluntary organisation that does tremendous work to maintain river safety, and the fire and rescue service. Their plea was for some specific funding for training, equipment and facilities, because they, too, have faced issues with equipment being tampered with. Does she agree that we should have specific funding for river safety?

Alison Thewliss: I sympathise with the families of those who have lost loved ones in the York area. The circumstances that the hon. Lady describes sound absolutely awful. I agree that more needs to be done on funding for these organisations, because it feels very much to me as though a lot of this is left up to charity and the good will of local organisations or councils rather than our having a specific pot of funding.

Incidents of drowning are, fortunately, decreasing in Scotland. Water Safety Scotland noted that there were 78 water-related fatalities in Scotland in 2018, down from over 100 in 2013, but that does not mean that we should be complacent. We need to continue to ensure that people do not lose their lives in the water. I note that the Scottish Government have designated 2020 the Year of Coasts and Waters. That seems as good an opportunity as any to discuss some issues to do with water safety, as well as exploring the virtues of our coasts and waters and the wider environment.

I am grateful to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, which responds to water incidents as part of its duties. It provided statistics that revealed that it attended 79 incidents on the Clyde last year, which is an increase of 13 on the previous year. It has a 3:1 ratio of rescues to fatalities, which is heartening, but there have been a few incidents in Glasgow recently that give me pause for thought as I cross the river in the course of my day; I can see the tributes to loved ones who have been lost.

We are very fortunate in Glasgow to have not only the water safety working group, but a dedicated organisation—the Glasgow Humane Society—watching over the safety of people using our waterways. The society was founded in 1790 by members of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, which

employed an officer to carry out the practical work of drowning prevention, rescue and the recovery of bodies from the river. Since then, it has sought to pursue water safety issues in Glasgow and the wider world, and it is now under the stewardship of the great George Parsonage. The Clyde runs in his blood, he having taken on the vocation of his father, Benjamin Parsonage, in the Glasgow Humane Society, and his family are very much involved in the organisation in a voluntary capacity.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady referred to rivers, seas, beaches and lakes. In my constituency, and probably in a lot of others, there are a lot of quarries. Unfortunately, over the years we have lost some people who have drowned in the quarries across Strangford. I am ever mindful that what is under the water in quarries is unknown, and of the chill and the depth of the water. Does she agree that when it comes to looking at waterways, whether that be rivers, beaches, tides, lakes and so on, we also have to include quarries?

Alison Thewliss: Yes, I agree. We need to think about all watercourses. People do not need very much water to drown in, so we must be mindful of all the risks out there.

The issue of removal of and damage to lifebelts is not new by any matter or means. As George told me yesterday, the society has a poster dating from 1860 warning of the dangers of damaging life-saving equipment. Today the society officer, William Graham, along with its many volunteers, collects lifebelts from the river and restores them to their rightful position. George tells me that this is a daily job, with anything from a few lifebelts to up to 30 having to be recovered from the river.

The system of reporting that we have in place in Glasgow, instigated by the Glasgow Humane Society, is one where lifebelts and ropes are placed on neon yellow poles along the banks of the city waterways. That makes it very clear where the lifebelts are located and when they are missing. Coming in today, I noted that the ones placed along the Thames are a lot less clear, having been placed inside boxes, meaning that people cannot immediately tell if there is a lifebelt in there when they need it, and it could take them longer to reach, too, which is time that cannot be spared when somebody is in the water.

The neon poles I mentioned, along with other vital resources such as rescue ladders, are all GPS-tagged and display a code, such as UN25, in a system that is understood by the local emergency services. It helps people to describe their location accurately in an emergency and allows them to easily report missing lifebelts or have them recovered. I would commend the system to other Members with watercourses in their constituencies. It is incredibly useful to be able to pinpoint exactly where an incident has happened so that the emergency services can respond.

I would also like to pay tribute to campaigners in Glasgow, Margaret and Duncan Spiers, constituents of the hon. Member for Glasgow North East, who is here today, who lost their son in an accidental drowning in the Clyde in 2016. They are passionate in the face of such adversity to ensure that all is done to prevent anybody going through the same pain. Their son slipped and fell into the water. The police threw in lifebelts but could not reach him, and he died in less than 10 minutes.

[Alison Thewliss]

The whole event was captured on CCTV. I cannot imagine how awful it must have been for Christopher's father, Duncan, to watch it back, knowing his son was so close to being saved. The Spiers have been tireless campaigners for water safety ever since and have succeeded in getting Glasgow City Council to install ropes to lifebelts along the banks of the Clyde. I am sure that all hon. Members would commend the Spiers for their campaign.

The Spiers hope that nobody has to experience what their family has gone through. They have taken the issue to the Scottish Parliament to ask for improvements, such as making ropes on lifebelts more common and providing life ropes and throw bags. More recently, they sought the use of specifically marked ropes so that, should they be removed, they could be easily identified if found in somebody's possession, which would enable the crime to be traced back to somebody. At the moment, if someone removes lifesaving equipment or carelessly or recklessly throws it into the river, it is very hard to pursue them, to identify perpetrators and get some resolution, particularly as waterways are often in rural and isolated areas. We cannot put CCTV on every lifebelt post in the city of Glasgow, so there is much to do to deter people from doing this in the first place.

There does not seem to be a specific offence of tampering with lifesaving equipment. Any fines would be for vandalism or theft. Someone could be charged with culpable and reckless behaviour, but this all feels far too discretionary.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing this debate to the House. She is making an excellent speech. I share her sentiments about the Spiers family. I have had the honour of meeting them and have been touched by their commitment to securing a safety legacy for the River Clyde, particularly with respect to lifebelt equipment. It beggars belief that somebody would damage or vandalise such equipment in the way that has been done. I should mention other campaigners, such as Stef Shaw and the Think Again campaign on emergency lifeline telephones. People in Glasgow are making a great effort to solve some of the problems, particularly in the light of the death of John Connelly—this extends to the Forth and Clyde canal as well. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need a much greater effort—perhaps charitable effort—to fundraise for equipment on the river? I note that Glasgow City Council has purchased 21 ropes to fit to lifebelts on the Clyde this year. Perhaps we could further improve capacity if some of these groups' charitable efforts were harnessed.

Alison Thewliss: I agree. There is always something to be said for charity fundraising and resources of that kind being raised, but, as hon. Members mentioned earlier, we cannot rely on that. More thought needs to be given to how we make it a lot more consistent and part of mainstream funding. It is lifesaving equipment and should not rely on charity alone.

There is not really an appropriate offence to cover such crimes—I would call them crimes—as tampering with lifesaving equipment. At the moment, there are various things that local authorities can do. A recent incident in the Salford Quays prompted the authorities

there to use a public spaces protection order, available under the law in England, to prevent people from interfering with safety equipment, but this only incurs a £90 fine—£60 if paid in 10 days. Apparently, this could end up in court if those fines are not paid, but that still seems not to get the balance quite right, given the gravity of what people are doing here. After all, this is lifesaving equipment. The *Manchester Evening News* reported that the cost to Salford Council of replacing the equipment and making the system more secure was £34,000—money that would not have to be spent if people did not engage in such mindless behaviour.

Turning to my asks of the Minister, I seek to find out if more can be done to catalogue the availability of water safety equipment, to ensure that as many watercourses as possible can have the reassurance of access to life-saving equipment. The UK Government could also carry out assessments to understand the extent to which damage is being caused and any hotspots. I have noted in my research and by speaking to people such as—

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Alison Thewliss: I have noted in my research and by speaking to campaigners with expertise, such as George Parsonage, that this is, sadly, all too common in many communities. Will the UK Government consider carrying out a wider, year-round campaign rather than just during Drowning Prevention Week? Perhaps they could look to the Scottish Government's drowning prevention strategy, which is funded and is working hard to deliver education and other public goods.

Like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I am struck by the lack of penalty for the undoubted public harm caused by tampering with life-saving equipment. I believe that there should be a specific aggravated offence related to tampering with life-saving equipment.

Fianna Fáil Senator Keith Swanick has promoted a private Member's Bill in Ireland that would make it an offence to steal or damage life-saving equipment such as defibrillators and lifebuoys. I do not want to stray too far from the issue of water safety, but many campaigns have fundraised to install defibrillators, and it is beyond belief that somebody would go out to damage one. I would argue that they also require protection.

The penalties proposed by Senator Swanick include fines of up to €50,000 and a jail term of up to five years, which are quite different from the £90 fine in England. Will the Minister consider introducing a similar measure? I do not know whether we will get new private Members' Bills or whether this Session of Parliament will ever come to an end. In the meantime, it would be useful if the Minister would consider other mechanisms that might be used to protect this vital resource and whether it could be placed in any existing legislation.

Duncan Spiers has said to me:

"The reason we want the law changed is to ensure the safety equipment is not tampered with...anyone tampering with this should be charged with putting a life at risk and not just vandalism. Our campaign is about accident prevention measures and anyone that goes into the Clyde by accident or suicide attempt should have the best chance of getting out of the water".

I wholeheartedly agree.

The Glasgow campaign is called “Taking a lifebelt is taking a life”. I ask the Minister to support the campaign and do all in her power to ensure that life-saving equipment is always there for those who need it in their moment of greatest need.

7.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The joy of the Home Office is that one can never quite understand the extent of its tentacles, so it was with some surprise—but, indeed, some pleasure—that I was called to respond on this important debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) on raising the subject, particularly given today’s weather. Nationally we are all feeling the heat a bit—not just those of us who are awaiting that phone call—so it is very tempting to seek cool waters in which to dip our toes or to submerge ourselves in a little further. She has shown great timing in securing this debate this evening.

I must start by saying how terribly affecting I found the hon. Lady’s descriptions of the incidents on the River Clyde in her constituency. The terrible experiences that her constituents and other families have suffered are heartbreaking. For the love of your life to meet their end in a matter of moments in water—that must be every parent’s worst nightmare. I very much reiterate and emphasise the hon. Lady’s message that removing or damaging life belts or other public rescue equipment is incredibly serious and can put people’s lives at risk.

As the hon. Lady may appreciate, the matters she has raised are devolved to Scotland. I will deal with the details of the legislation in a moment. I genuinely welcome the opportunity to set out the approach to and understanding of the extent of incidents across the United Kingdom, and the UK Government’s efforts to tackle them.

We know that on average 400 people drown across the UK in our rivers and seas each year and a further 200 people take their own lives in our waters. People who had no intention of entering the water in the first place account for 44% of drowning fatalities. This happens despite the enormous efforts of search and rescue and emergency services, who respond to around 35,000 water-related rescue and flood events each year. Indeed only in the past month or so in my county of Lincolnshire—I am delighted to be joined by my Lincolnshire neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson)—we have seen for ourselves the terrible impact flood events can have on people’s homes and ways of life.

As Members may be aware, in 2016 the National Water Safety Forum, whose members include organisations such as the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, put in place a national drowning prevention strategy, which aims to halve deaths in the UK by 2026. The Government support the strategy fully. I note that in Scotland, Water Safety Scotland brings together people and organisations from all over the country who over many years have developed a variety of water safety initiatives, including the drowning prevention strategy, which complements the UK strategy while taking into account the unique situation in Scotland—for example the legal and education systems and the

geographical differences. These national strategies are supported by a range of local initiatives, such as the new tidal Thames drowning prevention strategy established by the Tidal Thames Water Safety Forum and the work being taken forward by Glasgow’s Water Safety Group.

We are very clear that if someone is in trouble in the water, the availability of public rescue equipment is critical to reduce the likelihood of their drowning. Early intervention by a bystander may be the first and last opportunity for rescue—indeed the hon. Member for Glasgow Central mentioned the rurality of many of these locations—and theft and vandalism of equipment potentially endangers the lives of both the person in the water and those who would rescue them. As the recent awareness-raising campaign by Glasgow’s Water Safety Group made clear,

“taking a lifebelt is taking a life.”

Members rightly raised the question of education, and through the National Water Safety Forum’s UK drowning prevention strategy, we have highlighted the importance of water safety education at primary school and, where required, at key stage 3. I have seen some of that work myself, and it is very good.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of legislation. This is where devolution rears its head. If the hon. Lady is inviting the UK Government to take back powers, I will ensure that the new Prime Minister is made aware of that. In England and Wales, under the Criminal Damage Act 1971 vandalising life-saving equipment may be an offence that carries a maximum penalty of 10 years’ imprisonment, and an aggravated offence of that nature, which includes an intention to endanger life, attracts a potential maximum sentence of life imprisonment. The legislation in England and Wales therefore has the capacity to address the problem. However, antisocial behaviour and criminal damage legislation is devolved to Scotland, so it may well be that the hon. Lady’s lobbying should be directed at the Scottish Government to ensure—[*Interruption.*] I suspect she has that covered and is on it.

Sadly, because the matter is devolved, I cannot change the Scottish law, but the hon. Lady made her case very powerfully in this Chamber tonight. I note also that antisocial behaviour policy is devolved, and the 2014 legislation, which covers England and Wales, does not apply to Scotland.

Alison Thewliss: I am lobbying in all directions on this, the Minister can be assured of that. The issue seems to me to be that current provision is not providing enough of a deterrent and this is still happening right across different places, so perhaps a different approach, or more knowledge of that offence, might help.

Victoria Atkins: I think it is a combination. As we know all too well from the many debates we have had on the very serious topics that are looked after by the Home Office, legislation is but the first step. We have to ensure that people understand the legislation, and that the courts, the police and others who have an impact in this area apply the law appropriately. An offence of aggravated criminal damage carries the maximum sentence of imprisonment that we can impose in this country, so it may well be that getting the message out there through

[Victoria Atkins]

the various schemes that have been outlined in this debate is a very much the way to ensure that people understand just how serious it is when they attempt to interfere with equipment.

Mr Sweeney: I certainly agree about the criminal sanctions, but the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) also made an interesting point about the technology and infrastructure that Glasgow is using, which is quite efficient. Could the Home Office find a way to jointly fund national work to understand what technologies are available and consider adopting a national standard for life-saving equipment on rivers and canals? Could it also look at ways of using new technologies so that if a lifebelt is tampered with or removed, the authorities are automatically informed through technology such as remote sensors, and can ensure that is rapidly replaced? In that way, they would be aware that something had been damaged at a particular location.

Victoria Atkins: The idea of technology is a very interesting one, and I suspect that it is being looked at—through our forums, for example. I am not in a

position to commit the Home Office to anything at this stage, but my officials heard the hon. Gentleman's suggestion, and I anticipate their looking into it.

This has been an important debate, and I thank hon. Members across the House for their contributions. Water safety is not to be taken lightly, and those who vandalise equipment must be made to understand that their actions could be life-threatening. We have robust measures in place to tackle such antisocial behaviour and to safeguard the public from drowning. I very much hope that the House is reassured that there are measures in place to tackle the issues that have been raised, and I thank the hon. Lady for bringing this important debate to the House, particularly in the heat of the summer sun.

Mr Speaker: Has the Minister concluded her oration?

Victoria Atkins: There is great deal I could talk about, Mr Speaker, but it would probably not be on topic.

Mr Speaker: I will take that as a yes. We are deeply obliged to her.

Question put and agreed to.

7.12 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 24 July 2019

[MR ADRIAN BAILEY *in the Chair*]

Local Housing Allowance and Homelessness

9.30 am

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered local housing allowance and homelessness.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I am raising this issue because our constituents are in pain. A series of cuts, including the freeze in local housing allowance rates since 2016, has led to an increasing number of people across the country struggling to keep a roof over their heads. In the worst cases that is leading to homelessness and rough sleeping. The last 10 years of Tory rule have given us rising levels of homelessness in England. Rough sleeping alone has more than doubled in that time and in London in the last year it increased by 18%. The number of people in temporary accommodation has also increased. At the end of last year there were 83,700 individuals and families living in temporary accommodation, which is a 74% increase since 2010. It is unacceptable and we cannot allow it to continue. We must reverse it. We must look at the availability and affordability of housing.

Local housing allowance rates relate to housing benefit, which is now part of universal credit. They were introduced just over 10 years ago and are meant to give support to people on low income who are renting privately, including people who are working, so that they can keep up with paying their rent. However, in the last 10 years rates have been cut repeatedly and are now frozen, leaving people who need the support struggling to pay their rent. Research by Crisis and the Chartered Institute of Housing found that in 92% of areas in Great Britain, fewer than one in five homes were affordable within local housing allowance rates last year for single people, couples or small families. The cut has an impact on a huge number of people in most parts of the country, even when they are working.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree that Shelter's figures provide an even starker illustration than the picture he paints? They show that 31% of renters in receipt of housing benefit had to cut back on food for themselves or their partner, and two in five, or 37%, were forced to borrow money just to pay their rent in the last year. That indicates the scale of the problem. Does he agree that it proves that what is needed is not only the unfreezing of local housing allowance rates next year but their restoration to a realistic value?

Mr Sharma: I quite agree with my hon. Friend and am sure the Minister will take note. It is not a political argument. All the charitable and voluntary organisations express the same concerns, and we need to do something about it.

Too many people are at risk of homelessness as they struggle, month after month, to make up the shortfall between their rent and the support they get from local housing allowance. There is a huge problem in my constituency; it is staggering. From 2011, local housing allowance rates were meant to cover the most affordable third of local rents, but in my constituency, for single young people, just 1% of shared properties were affordable within the shared accommodation rate last year. For a family with one or two children, just 6% of two-bedroom properties were affordable. To give an idea of how far behind rents the rates now are, that family would have had to find more than £150 extra a month to rent a property in the cheapest third of the private rental market. That is not an amount that can be made up from better budgeting. It is two and a half weeks' worth of food shopping for the average family in London. No wonder that in too many cases it is almost impossible for people to cover the cost of their rent when they face such shortfalls. The ending of a private tenancy is one of the most common reasons why people become homeless today. What is more, when people lose their tenancy, it is equally impossible for them to find somewhere else to live within local housing allowance rates. They are left facing homelessness.

That is not the experience of a few people. Charities deal with people in that situation far too often. One woman I heard from is long-term sick and unable to work. She has to move out of her home because the landlord is selling the property, but as her local housing allowance rate is only £350 a month she cannot find anywhere else to live and is at risk of becoming homeless. That is having a huge impact on her severe anxiety. I heard from another woman, who has worked almost continuously since she was 16. She is now in her 50s. Four years ago she was made redundant, and she has struggled to get another job since. She is now struggling to find ways to manage a £300 monthly shortfall between her housing benefit and her rent. After years of work, the housing benefit system is failing her when she needs it most. She needs security and to get back on her feet. Another person who faces a huge shortfall between rent and housing benefit after having to stop work last year said, "It just feels like you are being kicked when you are at your lowest."

Visitors to Ealing soup kitchen have the same stories. Gert was failed by LHA when he was made homeless because he got a tiny increment in wages and his housing benefit help stopped, which effectively made him homeless for over a year while he was still trying to work. LHA also failed a volunteer at Ealing Soup Kitchen, Simone, who has been asked to leave a property and is unable even to bid for band D properties despite having a disabled child and working full time. On her low wage she cannot pay for high-rent properties, and there is a good chance that she will be made homeless by the system in September. She works in a care home and spends her spare time volunteering at homeless shelters—and she may end up having to use them.

Andrew Mcleay, the manager of Ealing Soup Kitchen, says:

"We try to help these people that slip through the cracks—however LHA is making our job almost impossible".

Ealing Soup Kitchen and other organisations in my constituency do amazing work, and help people move from homeless to hopeful. They save lives. I am confident

[Mr Virendra Sharma]

that the Members attending this debate, and every Member of Parliament, will have groups doing equally important work in their constituencies, but I particularly want to thank St Mungo's, Hope for Southall Street Homeless and Ealing Soup Kitchen for their amazing work. No-one should be in that desperate situation, and no one should become homeless or be at risk of it simply because the help they need is not there.

For years, social housing has been ignored and sold off, driving rising rents and falling housing stocks. Social rented housing is key for providing people on low incomes with secure, decent and affordable housing. But the Government are woefully behind in building enough homes to address the scale of need. Just 5,000 social rent units were built last year. Research from Crisis and the National Housing Federation has shown that we need to build 90,000 homes a year in England for the next 15 years to significantly reduce the worst forms of homelessness, such as rough sleeping and living in unsuitable temporary accommodation.

It will take time to build the social rent homes that are needed. That is why we must act now to ensure that people on low incomes can afford their rent in the private rented sector. We simply cannot afford to wait for more than a decade and, in the meantime, watch the numbers of people facing homelessness rise and rise. Right now, more and more people on low incomes are having to turn to the private rented sector to find homes, only to struggle to pay their rent because of cuts to local housing allowance rates. In reality, we need to fund both. We need to invest in increasing the supply of genuinely affordable housing, as the most effective long-term solution and the best way to manage the housing benefit budget, but that must not overshadow the urgent need to invest in an immediate and effective solution to help people to keep their existing home and avoid altogether the trauma of becoming homeless.

Unfreezing the rates and ensuring that they cover at least the cheapest third of local rents will significantly help people at risk of homelessness in the private rented sector. That will also help to reduce the number of individuals and families experiencing homelessness now. It will help those stuck in temporary accommodation or hostels, living on the streets, hidden away on people's sofas or sleeping at the back of buses to find a home and have the immediate means to keep it.

As I mentioned, we have seen a huge rise in the use of very expensive temporary accommodation. That is a result of fewer and fewer affordable housing options for councils to prevent and resolve homelessness, as per their statutory duty. That not only sustains people in insecure situations, but is a huge waste of taxpayers' money. As a country, we are spending almost £1 billion on temporary accommodation, rather than helping people to move into safe, stable and affordable homes. That money could be better spent on services to prevent homelessness from happening in the first place and save both the economic and the human costs of homelessness.

That is why I, along with many of my constituents, are supporting the Cover the Cost campaign launched by Crisis. That campaign has the support of thousands of people, several leading organisations in the area of housing and homelessness, councils and landlords. Those organisations include the Local Government Association

and the Residential Landlords Association. The campaign calls on the Government to restore local housing allowance rates so that they cover at least the cheapest third of rents.

We are due a spending review, and I am sure the new Prime Minister will at least deliver that. It is a prime opportunity to unfreeze local housing allowance and put sufficient investment into the rates so that they cover at least the cheapest third of rents. That will give an immediate and much-needed lifeline to so many people who right now cannot cover the cost of their rent and so are at severe risk of homelessness. The investment will also have an immediate impact on homelessness, helping people back into the housing market rapidly, and will make a significant difference to many of my constituents and many people across the country. If the Government are serious about ending rough sleeping, as their manifesto says, then we need an immediate investment in local housing allowance rates so that the system is adequately resourced to support people as intended.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. Let me advise hon. Members on how I will manage the debate. I intend to start calling the Front-Bench spokespersons by 10.28 am. That provides roughly six to seven minutes for each of Back-Bench speaker. If they could stick to that sort of timeframe, I would be grateful; if they exceed it, I will start getting very fidgety.

9.44 am

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey, in this really important debate. The hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) is absolutely right: this is a very key issue. Unless we get housing right, it will not be possible to deal with so many of the other issues that concern us, in the context of eradicating poverty, improving life chances, improving education and dealing with poor health. Housing is the absolute foundation of the decent, civilised society that all of us in the Chamber want to see.

What have we seen over the last few years? We are starting to see a rise in home ownership in the younger generation—35 to 44-year-olds; that is starting to inch up. Last year, we managed to build more homes than were built in all but one of the last 31 years. As my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing says, we need to build more and better-quality homes and we need to do that much more quickly than we have managed so far.

We also want to see longer-term tenancies. I am pleased with the moves that the Government are making in that direction. It is absolutely right that we also crack down on rogue landlords, because they should have no place in a decent society.

It is very welcome that the Government accepted the calls from the Local Government Association and others to scrap the housing borrowing cap. The Local Government Association advises that that will lead to the building of up to 10,000 new homes a year. That is a significant contribution towards the estimated 100,000 new social homes a year that are desperately needed.

I support councils in wanting to encourage home ownership, but we must do that without a corresponding decline in the number of social rented homes. That is

why it is so important that councils be able to keep 100% of the receipts from right-to-buy sales to invest in new affordable housing.

I am sure that all of us in the Chamber have frustrations about the planning system and the way in which we build houses in this country. I understand that in April the Local Government Association advised that there were 423,000 homes for which permission had been given to build but which still had not been built. The issue of slow build-out rates has gone on far too long. In my own constituency, up to about 13,000 homes in total are being built to the north of Houghton Regis and part of Luton. The end date for that development—for the final houses—will not be until some point in the early 2030s. That is simply too long—and unacceptable, given that there is desperate housing need now.

I wonder whether we need to be more imaginative about what we do on the big sites for which planning permission has been given, to which houses have been allocated—the houses are going to come—but which are left empty for years and years, even though there is desperate housing need. When I have taken my family away on summer holidays, we have stayed in a luxury-type chalet caravan park on various weeks away. Would it be possible to look at having that type of housing, on a temporary basis, on those huge sites where there are no houses but houses are planned? As the permanent houses were built, we could move those units off to other sites where we were waiting to build. That is not a long-term solution, but this is a really urgent issue—it is an “Action this day” issue. We need new, fresh, more imaginative thinking about how we meet the very urgent housing need that the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall set out very clearly and vividly for all of us in his speech.

If we build zero-energy-bill homes, the people who need these new homes will have more money for food, clothes and the household budget in general. It is possible to build houses that have no net gas and electricity bills; they are no more expensive to build than conventional homes. British architects such as Bill Dunster are building such homes now. I hope to have some in my constituency shortly. We are all asking why all new homes are not zero-energy-bill homes. That would help us to meet our net zero target and help poorer people to live within their means: if they do not have to pay gas and electricity bills, they will have more money for food and clothes, and to take their children on a family holiday.

We can do this; we just need to get on with it. To see how we can do it, hon. Members can visit the Building Research Establishment in Watford. We pay £23.5 billion a year in local housing allowance. The real answer is to build more. If we build more, we can solve a whole range of problems that concern us all.

9.51 am

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.

Central London, which includes my constituency, is the largest private rental market in the country. There is not one property for rent in the entire borough available to people on the local housing allowance rate. That includes not only some of the high-value property in Knightsbridge and Belgravia, which I would not expect

to be accessible to those on local housing allowance, but some of the poorest wards in the country, such as Paddington. It includes hundreds—probably thousands—of properties that were council flats, have been sold under the right to buy and are now rented back to private tenants. Flat 3, say, which is socially rented, costs £150 a week, yet the property next door, which is privately rented, costs £500 a week.

What does it mean that not a single person in my constituency can afford to rent in the private rented sector? It results in cases, such as one I received the day before yesterday, of a mother who has been privately renting for many years and whose landlord has evicted her through a no-fault procedure—no doubt, they will get more money from another tenant. The local authority has put her in emergency accommodation on the other side of London, as is often the case. That rent for emergency accommodation, incidentally, will be around £500 a week.

That woman has a child with a statement of special educational needs in the borough. The borough has now said that the care plan cannot be moved to another borough, so her child cannot get the 20 hours of educational support that they need in the borough where she is currently in emergency accommodation. She has to go through the whole statementing process again, but she will not be able to do that before September. Her child is clearly in need. I would say the local authority is in breach of its statutory duties. The mother is totally desperate.

Another mother has two children who are blind. She has been in the private rented sector a long time. She wanted to stay in the same area, because her two blind children know their routes to their school and college. However, the shortfall in her benefit payments is now so severe that she has to use all her children's disability allowance to meet the shortfall. That is probably legal, but it is clearly not what that benefit is intended for.

The situation is even worse for young people: under-25s can only get a single room and under-35s are also constrained. I am currently dealing with the challenge of trying to get a number of young people away from serious gang violence. One young man was sleeping with a machete under his pillow, because he was so terrified. For seven months, we have been trying to find somewhere he could afford to rent in London—in London, not just in the borough. There was not one property available in my constituency that was affordable, and only 0% to 15% of properties in the whole of London are affordable.

I am sure the Minister will refer to the targeted affordability fund, which has, thankfully, stood between us and total meltdown, but those complicated additional top-ups into schemes are not the answer. They are bureaucratic and complex, and they do not last. Similarly, discretionary housing payment is cited, as if it could plug the gap. Arithmetically, we know that it does not. DHPs are intrusive and complex. One woman was absolutely howling with grief to me because when she was filling out the form for a DHP, to fill the gap on her private rented property, she was told by the officer that in her budget breakdown she could not include taking her disabled child to the cinema—that expenditure was considered to be unacceptable if she was going to make a discretionary housing payment. I am sure we all have many examples of such untenable situations.

[Ms Karen Buck]

We know that for the foreseeable future we have to place in the private rented sector people whose incomes are too low to pay the rents and who will not be able to get into the social rented sector because there is such a catastrophic shortfall of socially rented properties, given that the right-to-buy scheme was not replaced and new building has not happened. It is all very well talking about meeting new targets, but we know that there has been a 90% fall in construction of social housing in the last nine years.

If people will be in the private rented sector, we have to act on quality and security. The Government are making some noises on that, which is good. We also have to act on affordability. I have been working with Sadiq Khan; I am pleased that the Mayor is bringing forward proposals to look at rent control. For the foreseeable future, we cannot just pour public money into supporting rents, which are rising again after a short levelling off. We cannot just expect public money to fill that gap, so we do need that. In the meantime, while we are trying to build and while we are waiting for the Government to act on control of rents, we urgently have to close that gap.

That means ending the freeze and restoring the housing allowance, so that at least the 30th percentile of renters in every single rental market, not just a few, can afford housing—and we need to keep it there. Without that, we will find more and more people, such as my constituents, swelling the ranks of the homeless—we already have 58,000 homeless families in London alone. They will be driven deeper and deeper into poverty, which will scar their lives forever and from which it will take them many years to recover.

9.57 am

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. It is also a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), of whom I am quite a fan, because the Act she introduced—the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018—is an essential piece of legislation. I am delighted that the Government supported it. I frequently agree with her.

I felt the need to speak in this debate because I was concerned that too many Opposition Members would make it seem like a world of doom and gloom, as if the Conservative party was doing nothing to support homeless people—I understand it to be the opposite. Immediately before coming to Parliament, I had been with YMCA Birmingham for three years. Just before I left to become an MP, I was the assistant chief executive. Those were three of the most fulfilling years of my life, working for an organisation that provided accommodation to previously homeless young people. During my tenure, how did things look when it came to what the Government were doing?

When I joined, the YMCA had funding for £500,000 through the empty homes programme, which offers the opportunity to find buildings that are vacant—it is not just a question of building new things—and use them for accommodation, and in this case for previously homeless young people. Harry Watton House was previously used by Birmingham City Council to provide social care, but it had not used it for some time and we converted it into 34 flats.

Also during my tenure the Government, through the HCA, gave us a £1 million contribution towards a building in Erdington, where we were providing 34 extra units of accommodation. We had accommodation of different types, because someone's journey from street homelessness to sustaining a tenancy of their own goes through many stages. We had a 72-bed direct access hostel, where people were provided with just a room with a sink, plus shared shower and kitchen facilities. That property is currently undergoing a £3.6 million renovation with money from this Government. It will mean that people can come in straight off the street, straight out of prison or, sadly, from military service—they are frequently former members of the armed forces who just find life too chaotic when they leave.

“Chaotic” is how we could describe those people's lives. When we were servicing their rooms or doing repairs, we would frequently find machetes or other items under their mattress—that was the type of world that they had been involved in before coming to us, and they felt safe and secure only when they had such weapons with them. Our job was to stabilise their lifestyle and get them ready for the next stage: supported accommodation. In 2015, I was terrified when the then Chancellor announced that he would cap housing benefit at local housing rates, and that that might apply to supported housing. However, YMCA campaigned vigorously against that proposal and made a powerful argument to the Government, and fortunately it was not imposed on us.

As I say, we had direct access accommodation, we had Harry Watton House, which offered supported accommodation, and finally we had our building in Erdington, thanks to £1 million from the Government; it must have been a fine building, because Princess Anne turned up to open it. All YMCA's work—offering support and counselling, bringing in third parties and third sector organisations to help people who were on drugs or had other lifestyle problems—was supported by the Government through supported housing funding or capital funding.

The hon. Member for Westminster North mentioned the Mayor of London. Well, in the West Midlands Combined Authority we have a Mayor of our own, Andy Street. His first priority on becoming Mayor was to tackle homelessness across the region. It is far from being the case that Conservatives or this Government are not aware of the homelessness problem, not doing everything they can to address it, not taking the matter seriously or not working hard to support those in most need.

Richard Burden: I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the work of YMCA. However, given that 12,000 households are on Birmingham's housing waiting list and 2,500 households are in temporary accommodation, does he feel that the first priority that the Mayor set for himself is being achieved?

Eddie Hughes: The Mayor has not been in post for very long.

Richard Burden: But it's getting worse.

Eddie Hughes: It would not have been the Mayor's first priority if it were not a substantial problem, as the hon. Gentleman rightly sets out. We all recognise that it is a substantial problem in the west midlands, but the Mayor is certainly putting all he can into tackling it. He

is one man with limited powers, but often a Mayor's power is a subtle one—the power to convene. One of the great things that he did was get a lot of housing associations across the region to work together to decide where they would be best placed to develop land, build new houses and so on, and engage them with the idea of tackling homelessness.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab) *rose*—

Eddie Hughes: I give way, but I am running out of time.

Liam Byrne: I am grateful; I will be very brief. When the Mayor came to office, Her Majesty's Government promised £211 million to build new homes. Parliamentary questions show that £209 million has not been paid out. Why has the Mayor not secured that cash in hand?

Eddie Hughes: I am disappointed to say that I cannot speak on behalf of the Mayor, but I will keep my eye on my phone today, just in case I become the Housing Minister—in which case I will be in a position to answer the right hon. Gentleman's question.

Liam Byrne: Good answer.

Eddie Hughes: I completely accept the right hon. Gentleman's case about the money that has been promised. He and I spoke at a recent event in Parliament with Midland Heart, and I completely back his case for ensuring that we secure that funding.

10.4 am

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) on leading the debate so thoroughly. I shall be brief.

The Minister will not be surprised to hear my usual plea for a redesign of the local housing areas. Stroud was put in the same local housing area as Gloucester. That had nothing to do with this Government—a previous Government did it—but because Gloucester's rents are traditionally much lower than Stroud's, it has affected us particularly badly. I hope that the Minister will be able to tell us some good things, because it has had two effects.

First, people on lower incomes in my constituency are now being forced towards Gloucester, because it is the only place where they can pick up private renting. Secondly and more particularly, there is a huge shortfall. Private landlords are increasingly refusing to take anyone on benefits in the Stroud area, because they know that there is a shortfall. It has undoubtedly pushed rents up—it is difficult to prove, but that is the word on the street—which has put my local authority, Stroud District Council, under even more pressure as a result of homelessness, even though it is trying to build more houses and bring more social housing into play.

The best illustration is the horrifying figures that I and other hon. Members received from Shelter when preparing for our debate. In the Gloucester-Stroud local housing area—I suspect the figures for Stroud alone are much worse—only 9% of four-bedroom properties are within the local housing allowance.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a very good speech. Although the problem may be most acute in London and the south-east, it applies right across the UK, as he points out. In my constituency there is not a single four-bed, three-bed or two-bed property that fits within the LHA, and the only one-beds are caravans or the odd sheltered housing flat. It applies everywhere.

Dr Drew: I agree. My hon. Friend's example shows, in a nutshell, what it is like out there. It is not only that housing is not available, but that the limited amount available is of such poor quality that families in a desperate state are being forced into even greater poverty. They then almost certainly have to top up.

The figures in the Gloucester-Stroud area show a shortfall of £27.24 for a single room, which rises to £112.46 for a four-bed property—if there even are any, which I suspect there are not. I make a heartfelt plea to the Minister that this cannot go on. Such is the difficulty we face with the dislocation in the housing market. We have to accept that private renting is there for people who do not stand a chance of getting a council property or any other form of social housing, because they are so far down the band system as a result of whatever may have happened in their past, their inability to pay the rent or their not being local to the area. They end up renting in the private sector; they get penalised because they cannot find anything; if they do find something it is poor—and then they have to top up.

Please, Minister, can we look at this as a crisis and start doing something about it?

10.9 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate. I thank the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) for setting the scene so well, and all hon. Members for their substantial contributions. As always, I will give a Northern Ireland perspective on the matter and give an idea of what is happening there.

It is good to see the Minister in his place. He has not been in post long, but hopefully he will continue in it long after today. I know that he has a deep interest in this subject, and we look forward to hearing his response to the genuine questions that we have, because I know that he will do his best.

Despite targeted affordability funding, less than 10% of the local housing allowance rates now cover the rent of the cheapest 30% of private homes. That is a chasm of difference, which is very hard to equate, as other Members have said. Many people who cannot get on the social housing ladder and who have no family to take them in realistically have to resort to sleeping on the streets. It is not by choice; it is almost by design that they are unable to find accommodation.

I have had a number of such cases in my constituency. Entering the private housing system is not an option for many benefit claimants, given how high the cost of rental is in the private housing sector. People without a partner who are benefit claimants cannot realistically get a one-bedroom flat through social housing and cannot afford to get one through private rental under the current allowances, because the two figures just do not equate, as I have said.

[*Jim Shannon*]

The hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) mentioned a mother with two children who are visually handicapped, who has to use the money that should be purposely set aside for their disability to pay the rent, so that they have accommodation and the children can get to school. That is a supreme example of the problems that people have, and I am sure that the Minister will respond to it specifically if he can.

Given the issues, why should we expect people to try and get suitable accommodation? I know the difficulties in my area. My staff and I were working with a young man who was literally sleeping in a garage. He was 40, so not entitled to homeless points, despite our efforts on his behalf. We all tried to get him into accommodation in the area, but he could not get a one-bedroom flat in his price range. His elderly mother—very often, family members step in—ended up paying the difference, but when she passes away, hopefully not for a long, long time, I do not know where this troubled young man will be. He will certainly not be in a private rental.

Nobody should have to sleep on the streets in this day and age, as I think all of us—the Minister, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), and all right hon. and hon. Members here today—realise. I believe that we must try to bring more people into employment, so that they do not have to rely on benefits to provide them with a stable home. I will make some comments and ask some questions about that shortly, because this issue is not just the Minister's responsibility; other Departments have a role to play as well.

The local housing allowance should be a safety net for people, so that they can find a job to provide them with a bit more stability. Yes, some people may undoubtedly seek to take advantage of the benefits system as an excuse not to find a job, but I have to say that, from my evidential basis, I do not see that. I am not saying that it does not happen, but I do not see it in my constituency.

There is a genuine lack of housing at these prices, and private rental landlords are sometimes loth to take universal credit or housing benefit tenants, and especially not at a discounted rate. There is a very difficult balance to strike between a rental that is correct and a housing benefit or universal credit system that helps people to stay in the accommodation they are in.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an extremely powerful and important speech. He seems to be making the case for much-needed and industrial-scale social rented housing, which would provide people with basic security of tenure for their home, so that they can then get a job and enter the workplace with that assuredness. I think he is also saying that there is such a big gap between housing costs and local housing allowance provision, particularly for one-bedroom accommodation.

Jim Shannon: I have been a great believer in social housing. I have supported it all my life, and I regularly have people coming to me trying to access it. It is incredibly important for those who cannot afford to buy their own home—even more so today. Alongside that, when it comes to social housing, we must provide a

benefit system, and the LHA enables people to stay in their accommodation, so the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I totally agree with what he said.

I have sympathy for those experiencing difficulties and recognise that people may be experiencing difficult times that prevent them from finding a job. I believe that help should be available to them, but there is another aspect of this issue, and that is getting the right qualifications to find a stable job—a reality that some people fail to face up to in school. In 2017, 16.6% of Northern Ireland residents aged between 16 and 64 had no qualifications. I believe that these problems are intrinsically linked, which is the point I made earlier. It is not just the Minister's Department; the Department for Education, the Department of Health, the Department for Work and Pensions and others all have a role to play. To tackle homelessness, we must tackle the problem of people having no qualifications, as low-skilled jobs are becoming harder and harder to come by nowadays.

Unfortunately, homelessness and deaths are linked, and I will give hon. Members some statistics—I cannot say that they are exactly linked together, but the stats may just tell us something. In Northern Ireland from October 2017 to the end of August 2018, an average of 13 homeless people per month had their housing applications closed due to death. Of the deceased, 63% were aged 60 or younger and the youngest was only 18. The majority, 93, were male. Their cause of death is unknown; I make that comment clearly. This is a problem, and I believe that these people should be helped. These figures are distressing, and it is horrendous that people cannot get a helping hand to lift them out of the difficult situation they are in.

A new strategy is required if we seek to solve the homelessness problem across the UK. Getting more people into work and getting people with the right qualifications would be steps in the right direction.

To conclude, support should be available to those in need, and certainly used as a springboard to get them into employment and keep this fine nation going forward, but in the short term we need affordable housing—the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) referred to social housing. That housing simply is not there at present. We need funding to build affordable housing, and for rent control as well. We simply should not have people on the streets in this nation, and we need to do all we can to ensure fit-for-purpose allowances in areas with a lack of one or two-bedroom accommodation, as compared with those on the housing stress list.

10.16 am

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Bailey.

A stone's throw from St Philip's Cathedral, on the steps of the House of Fraser, in the heart of Birmingham's business district, there is a shrine. It is marked with flowers, photos and expressions of feelings. Here, in the wealthiest quarter of the second city of the fifth richest country on Earth is the latest memorial to a man who died homeless on the streets. "You are unforgettable, Miguel", reads one dedication. That is right. It is right that we remember this man in our city. It is right that we hear and remember his name in the House of Commons. And it is right that we remember the names of the 90 people,

along with him, who have died homeless in our city since 2013, many on the streets of the second city in this country.

Those people are the citizens who we collectively have failed, so I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma). I personally believe that we should be debating every day the deadly doctrine behind this death toll, because be under no illusion: this is now a moral emergency and it requires from the new Prime Minister today an emergency response.

In Birmingham, rough sleeping has now risen by almost 1,000% since 2010, yet that is just the visible crisis that we can see. The invisible crisis is just as bad. In total, 20,000 people—the size of a small town—along with 5,000 children are now lodged in temporary accommodation. They are cursed to move every couple of weeks, when it is time to rebook. Be under no illusion: these are futures that are now being sacrificed, as every single one of us who has had to support children taking their GCSEs from a Travelodge will now know.

Andrew Selous: The right hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful and moving speech. Of the 90 people who died, is he aware how many had drug issues at the same time? I absolutely accept that decent housing helps people to get over drug problems, but does he know the proportion that were involved with drugs?

Liam Byrne: We do not know, because obviously there is not a safeguarding adult review for everyone who dies. There should be a safeguarding adult review for everyone who dies, because my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall made a sensible but crucial point: that local housing allowance is absolutely part of this crisis. He is absolutely right. The average LHA in Birmingham, which is £132 a week, covers only two thirds of the cost of a median home in our city. However, it would be delusional to pretend, as our current Mayor has tried to do, that local housing allowance is somehow the nub of the changes we need to make.

The truth is that to fund tax cuts for the lucky, this Government have reduced social insurance for the unlucky to a clutch of shreds and patches. This Government have now cut back so hard that social insurance in this country is now in systems failure. I know the Minister will say that it was a hard choice, but the truth is that it was the wrong choice. The tax cuts that have been handed out to British corporates now total £110 billion. Overwhelmingly, that money has either gone back to shareholders or is lodged in those corporates' bank accounts. It was the wrong choice, because rather than strengthen the hand that helps, this Government chose to feather the nests of those who already had plenty.

I will illustrate the systems failure that we now face. From all my interviews with homeless citizens in Birmingham through the long nights, what has become clear is that three systems are needed: a benefits system, a health system and a housing system. All three are now in crisis. Mental health caseloads in our region are now rising four times faster than funding. Addiction services in our region have been cut back by between 12% and 20%. The University of Birmingham has concluded that the health services provided to homeless people are now so bad that those people are actually being denied access to basic health services. Housing benefit hands

cash to the landlords of houses in multiple occupation in a way that is completely unregulated, with no obligation on them to provide much-needed counselling or support. There is no regulation of private landlords worthy of its name, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) said, the conditions that we now contend with are absolutely disgraceful.

We are building affordable homes in our region so slowly that it will take us until the 2050s to clear the council waiting lists across the region, which now number well over 50,000. Just to add insult to injury, although the Government promised £211 million to build new homes, according to parliamentary questions they have handed out only £2 million. That means that £209 million is left in the Treasury when we have people dying on the streets of our city.

Matt Western: My right hon. Friend is making a powerful and important speech. Does he agree that there are two issues: that the Government are hiding behind statistics about housebuilding that are inflated through permitted development rights and in other ways, and that we are seeing an increase in HMOs? The provision is completely inappropriate for the housing and social needs in our communities.

Liam Byrne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are hiding behind definitions of “affordable housing” that are frankly meaningless in the real world. What we need to be doing is building houses for social rent—what used to be called council houses. Let us again build council houses that communities can be proud of.

This systems failure is now killing people, as should be obvious to all of us in this House. I pay tribute to the incredible coalition of kindness in my city that is trying to turn the tide, particularly Councillor Sharon Thompson, who knows a thing or two about homelessness, Jean Templeton, who is chairing the Mayor's taskforce, and the 14 or 15 different outreach groups that make sure that the homeless people in our city are not actually starving on the streets. However, what those people need is a Government who are on their side, and are prepared to make sure that the Mayor does not spend £1 million on secret consultants, but puts that money into ensuring that there are more emergency shelter places than there are rough sleepers.

We need a hard duty on all public services to act together and collaborate to prevent homelessness from happening in the first place. We need a region-wide private landlord licensing scheme. We need to expand accommodation in refuges. We need a universal offer on all public services for vulnerable people. We need to double the pace of council house building. We need to end the Vagrancy Act 1824 and reintroduce housing benefit for the under-25s. We need to end the lunacy of the “no recourse to public funds” rule, and we need an urgent review of the exempt accommodation rules.

George Dawson, the founder of the civic gospel in our city—the precursor of municipal socialism—once asked his congregation,

“Are you prepared to vindicate the enormous wealth of some men, side by side with the extreme poverty?”

I am not prepared to live in a city where we have cranes in the sky, but homeless people dying in the doorways. We need an emergency response to this moral emergency, and I hope the Minister will drive it through with today's new Prime Minister.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): We now come to the Front Bench spokespersons, who normally get 10 minutes. There is a little in excess of that, but given the number of questions that have been asked of the Minister, could the Opposition Front Bench spokespersons be disciplined and give him adequate time to respond to them?

10.24 am

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): As always, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) on securing this hugely important debate and thank everyone who has contributed to it, including the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) who, with his hands-on experience from the YMCA, shone an interesting light on this issue based on his own background.

As we have heard so often this morning, there is an inescapable and undeniable link between the paucity of affordable rented property in the private rented sector and the increased risk of people becoming homeless simply because they cannot afford to meet the cost of living in private rented accommodation. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was absolutely right when he described the “chasm of difference” between what those people are expected to pay and what they can afford to pay. To back up what the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall said, local housing allowance should be there to help those on low incomes meet the cost of renting a home, and provide stability and security in their housing situation and prevent the risk of falling into homelessness.

The hon. Members for Westminster North (Ms Buck) and for Stroud (Dr Drew) were also right in what they said. They gave all-too-real examples of what happens to people, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable in our society, who are told that they can no longer afford to live in the areas where they have grown up and in which they have roots and families. It is little wonder that social problems follow as people are moved further and further away from the areas in which they have those roots.

However, let us be absolutely clear: this housing crisis, particularly in England, as well as the rising levels of homelessness and rough sleeping, did not happen by accident. There has not been some unforeseen set of circumstances that has led to the number of households living in temporary accommodation in England rising by 60% between 2012 and 2018. There has been no unexpected or unforeseen quirk that has led to the number of rough sleepers in England nearly doubling over the past five years—far from it. This housing crisis was all too predictable, because just about every stakeholder warned the Government right from the start about the inevitable consequences of pursuing their austerity agenda. When they froze local housing allowance and failed to meet their targets for building social housing, what did they expect to happen, other than a rise in homelessness and the number of people sleeping rough on our streets? That is exactly what has happened, so let us call this what it is: a crisis entirely of the UK Government's own making.

It is incontestable that the UK Government's austerity agenda has had a hugely negative impact on people's ability to rent private sector accommodation. Research from the Chartered Institute of Housing shows that

many LHA rates now fail to cover even the cheapest third of rents as they were designed to do, and a survey carried out by the National Housing Federation and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations found that tenants on universal credit were more than twice as likely to be in debt than other tenants.

This year alone, the Scottish Government will spend in excess of £125 million to mitigate the worst impacts of those cuts and seek to protect those on low incomes. That will include £50 million to mitigate the bedroom tax and £63 million in discretionary housing payments, of which £1.3 million will be used to directly offset the impact of the LHA freeze. However, it is not the responsibility of the Scottish Government to foot the bill for the Tories' austerity programme; that is the UK Government's responsibility, and theirs alone. By lifting the benefits freeze, the Scottish Government will no longer have to plug those gaps caused by austerity, and those funds can be spent on other vital services that benefit the people of Scotland.

The freeze to local housing allowance has had a devastating impact on the poorest people in our society. Removing the freeze and reinstating its true value would be an enormous help, but that is only part of the answer. Only by increasing the supply of affordable housing will long-term, sustainable solutions to the crisis be found. Last month the Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), admitted exactly that in reply to an urgent question, saying that a lack of new housing was a major factor in the rise of homelessness, and that,

“successive... Governments... have... not built enough affordable... social... housing.”—[*Official Report*, 13 June 2019; Vol. 661, c. 833.]

We have heard from others this morning, including the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), that the shortage of housing, particularly for social rent in England, is a major contributory factor to the rise of homelessness. The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) was absolutely spot on when he said that it was fuelling both the invisible and the visible housing crisis.

The Centre for Policy Studies reckons that England is on course for its worst decade of house building since the second world war. It has calculated that the total number of completions between 2010 and 2019 will average out at 130,000 a year, which is down 20,000 from the figure of the 1990s and 2000s, and is at only half the level seen in the '60s and '70s—a successive pattern that has continued for almost half a century. As I said at the start, the issue is about political choices and Governments deciding what their priorities are and what they deem to be important. That is why I fully commend the work of the SNP Scottish Government, who have delivered 76,500 affordable homes since 2007 and are investing more than £3 billion to deliver another 50,000 affordable homes by the end of the current parliamentary Session in 2021. That figure will include 60,000 homes for social rent, 7,000 homes for affordable rent and just over 20,000 homes designed for affordable home ownership. In addition, the Scottish Government continue to support the empty homes partnership, which has brought 3,200 empty homes back into use since 2010.

To put the figures into perspective, between 2007 and 2018, the supply of affordable housing per head of population in Scotland has been a third higher than in

England. In the four years to 2018, the Scottish Government have delivered 50% more affordable housing units per head of population than the UK Government have for the people of England. In those four years, the Scottish Government have delivered a remarkable five times more social rented properties per head of population—84 units per 100,000 compared with only 13 for the people of England. That is not because the Scottish Government have a magic wand and are able to do things that this Parliament cannot do. It is simply that the Scottish Government have prioritised housing as a fundamental of any decent society and, despite a shrinking budget, have invested accordingly. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the Scottish Government have stopped the right to buy in Scotland. We have protected social rented homes and prevented them from entering into the private sector to the tune of up to 15,500 houses in the past 10 years.

In conclusion, as I said earlier, what we are witnessing, particularly in England, is a crisis entirely of the UK Government's own making. Knowing full well the consequences of their actions, the Government steamed ahead, creating a perfect storm where punitive, arbitrary and deeply damaging cuts to welfare, coupled to a devastating under-investment in building social housing, have led to soaring rents in the private sector and caused a spike in homelessness and rough sleeping. It is the UK Government's own mess. When will they wake up to the crisis that they are creating?

10.33 am

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) on securing this important and timely debate and on spelling out the reality for so many of our people. I also congratulate him on the 12th anniversary of his election to Parliament yesterday, which we were pleased to celebrate last evening.

As my hon. Friend said, we know that rough sleeping in London has hit a record high with an 18% rise on last year, but it is not limited to London. Since 2010, when the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition Government came to power, rough sleeping has more than doubled across England, and there is no one reason for that. There are ways that it could have been prevented, but successive Governments since 2010 seem to have been content to allow the numbers to escalate. Even when they have admitted that there is an issue, the Government have failed to act. Two Prime Ministers have seen the numbers grow on their watch. I wonder what the new one, due to be installed later today, will make of such a terrible legacy and what he will do to sort it out.

Our Governments and Prime Ministers have been too preoccupied with Brexit and internal warring, meaning that people across this country have been let down and forced on to the streets because they simply have no other option. It is not that the Government do not know what is happening to people who are being made homeless. Ministers are quite happy to turn up and spout at events like the recent one hosted by Crisis, but we know that for all their rhetoric and plans, rough sleeping has dropped by less than 2% in the past year. If it is to be eradicated, at that rate it will take 50 years to sort it out, so I am left with no other conclusion than to ask whether they simply do not care enough to act.

Let us look at what the Conservatives have done—the decimation of social housing up and down the country over recent years, a failure to build the social housing needed, and the erosion of the welfare state. Such failures have been major factors in generating a worrying rise in homelessness, and it is across the piece. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is always in his place speaking up for the people of Northern Ireland. He made it very clear that the crisis here in the UK is reflected in Northern Ireland, too, and it is families that suffer as a result.

There is ultimately one root cause that must be tackled if we are serious about ending homelessness. We need to increase the availability and affordability of housing. Stable and secure homes will give people the best chance of moving on from homelessness, or preventing it altogether. Unfortunately, we are in a position where having housing for every person is seen as an ambitious goal when it should be the standard and the bare minimum. The Government have moved the goalposts of what is seen as reasonable and turned adequate housing for all into the unachievable.

We know that many people live on low incomes. A person could work 40 hours a week on the minimum wage and not be able to afford the cost of renting privately in some places in this country, especially if they have children. We should not have a race to the bottom where only those with higher incomes can afford adequate housing. Those on lower incomes deserve secure, decent living conditions with affordable rents, but that is not the situation in Westminster North, as my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) said. Not a single home is available for low-income families and we have the lamentable situation where former council homes are now out of reach of the poorest people because of rents of as much as £500 a week.

On the need for social housing, the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) spoke of the need to build more homes more quickly. He talked about energy-efficient and bill-free homes, and he is entirely correct about that—no doubt about that—but the Government have built fewer than 7,000 new homes provided at social rent in England in 2017-2018, when what we need is 90,000 each year for the next 15 years just to tackle the backlog of housing need. People are being forced to turn to private rented housing. Although some positive moves have been made regarding tenant fees, affordability is still a major problem, even if people can find a property in the first place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) spoke of private landlords refusing to take people on benefits. What does the Minister have to say about that? Is he surprised that private landlords are not always accommodating and understanding when their tenants are late with their rent payments? The reality is that families are being evicted because they cannot keep up with rent payments, and they enter undesirable living arrangements—sleeping on the floors of other family members, at best, and sleeping in cars and on the streets. We have heard other examples as well. Often it means that families are split up, leading to more pain and suffering.

Research from Crisis—we have heard much about its research—and the Chartered Institute of Housing has shown that cuts to local housing allowance rates mean

[Alex Cunningham]

that in 92% of areas in Great Britain, single people and couples or small families who need local housing allowance to pay their rent will struggle to find somewhere to live that they can actually afford. Until social housing can meet demand, people on low incomes must be able to find secure and stable housing in the private rented sector. Shelter has said that targeted affordability funding is not alleviating the problem. The top-up grant for areas most affected by the freeze in local housing allowance—just a 3% increase—has not worked.

Ms Buck: Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating London Councils, which has been doing some excellent research? It found that, even over the period of targeted affordability funding, single rooms had declined in affordability by more than 10% since 2015.

Alex Cunningham: Yes, and what is happening in response? Very little. So much more needs to be done. The housing allowance is not allocated or based on how many areas are in need, just distributed to areas in a ranked order until there is no more money. In Shelter's words, the affordability funding is "not even close to plugging the gap."

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall proved that the housing crisis is very real with a series of case studies of real people and families in crisis. They are not just numbers in a table of statistics. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) told us that we need to remember the names of some of the people who never found a home, and spoke of the memorial to Miguel in his constituency. He also spoke of children in his area who are taking their GCSEs while accommodated in the local Travelodge. I understand why he is asking the new Prime Minister to take action on that systematic failure.

I hope that the Minister remains in post, and can do something. As I mentioned, we will get a new Prime Minister today, and there will be a lot of shuffling around, but whether the Minister remains or provides a handover to his successor, I urge him to work to restore local housing allowance rates back to the 30th percentile of the market, as others have called for. We need to address homelessness with immediate effect, and provide a lifeline to people on a low income. We simply cannot afford not to.

I know that it can be easy to sit in opposition and criticise those making the decisions, but Labour has made some bold pledges that we will deliver when we win a general election. We will define affordable housing as linked to local income, and scrap the Conservatives' so-called affordable rent home price, at up to 80% of market rates. We will stop the sell-off of 50,000 social rented homes a year by suspending the right to buy—I am pleased that the Scottish Government have done that already—ending all conversions to affordable rent, and scrapping the Government's plans to force councils to sell their best homes.

We will back councils and housing associations with new funding, powers and flexibilities to build at scale. While we work to provide 8,000 homes for rough sleepers, we will provide local authorities with £100 million to deal with winter pressures and ensure that no one sleeps rough. We will also tackle the scandal of empty homes,

many of which need upgrading to be habitable, and many more of which investors simply buy and leave empty, believing that the value will go up and they will make a financial killing.

The crisis is leaving families homeless because of the Government's failure to act. Successive Conservative, and Lib Dem coalition, Governments have failed on housing and failed to end homelessness—no wonder people have no confidence in their housing policies. There is no doubt in my mind that it is time to act on house building and, in the meantime, on the local housing allowance, before even more families are shown the door and thrown out on to the streets.

10.43 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I, too, thank the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) for securing this important debate, and colleagues from across the House for sharing compelling accounts.

I have been in post for only three months. It will come as no surprise to Members that both housing and, in particular, tackling homelessness and rough sleeping are passions of mine, as I have co-chaired the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness. I will start by saying that I get it, and I share Members' passion for fixing it and getting it right. I work very closely with stakeholders in the field, including Crisis, St Mungo's, Shelter and many others. Even in just the past three months, I have met with most of them and have been on several visits to see and experience the lived experience of some of those they support.

I recognise the issue, which, although I accept it is largely now nationwide, is particularly acute in certain parts of the country where there is very high demand and limited supply. I am also aware that too many people have to top up their housing from their benefits, which are designed for the cost of living. We have to put that right. I am determined to address it, and I am working very closely with the Secretary of State, who has been hugely supportive of the moves that I have made in this area.

Currently, there are no plans to extend or maintain the benefits freeze after March 2020, but specific decisions on how to uprate local housing allowance from April 2020 will form part of the discussions in support of fiscal events later this year. I will address as many points raised as possible, but I am conscious that we have a relatively limited amount of time, and that a number of them are more appropriate for a Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government colleague. I will certainly raise those points with my counterparts, subject to my still being in post tomorrow or the day after.

Reform to housing support was a central part of the Government's plan to create a welfare system that supports the most vulnerable and is fair to taxpayers. To help to ensure a balance between those two elements, LHA rates are not intended to meet rents in all areas. The intention behind the welfare reform programme is that the same considerations and choices faced by people not in receipt of benefits should also be faced by those claiming benefits. The LHA policy is designed to achieve that.

Liam Byrne: It was not so long ago that, at about 2 am or 3 am, I met a man who goes by the name of “Ginge”. He sleeps in the Barclays bank lobby at Colmore Row, and has schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Is he supposed to find the money to cover the entire rent of a home that he could move into?

Will Quince: The right hon. Gentleman refers to rough sleeping. Often people lump homelessness and rough sleeping together, but there is a huge difference between them. The Government are taking considerable action on rough sleeping. I will happily meet him, or arrange for the Housing and Homelessness Minister to do so, in order to discuss it in more detail. I know that he cares hugely about this issue, and contributes to debates on it. I share his passion. The Government are taking significant action, but he is right that we must look at LHA rates. I hope I made it clear at the outset that I am doing that with the Secretary of State, and ahead of the next fiscal event we are looking very closely at what more we can do.

Between 2000 and 2010, housing benefit expenditure rose by more than half in real terms, reaching £25 billion in today’s prices. Left unreformed, by 2014-15 housing benefit would have reached £29 billion. That was clearly not sustainable. The measure to freeze local housing allowance rates for four years from April 2016 built on reforms introduced in the previous Parliament, which saved £6 billion in total by 2015-16. Savings from freezing LHA are estimated to be around £655 million for Great Britain over the four-year period of the measure. Our reforms are part of our wider goal to move people from welfare and into work.

We recognise that some places have seen higher increases in rents than others, and have made provision to help people further in those areas, as the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) mentioned. We have used a proportion of the savings from the freeze to reduce the gap between frozen LHA rates and the 30th percentile reference rent in the areas of greatest rental growth. Initially, 30% of the savings from the freeze were used for targeted affordability funding, but we invested an additional £125 million in that funding for the final two years of the freeze. That was based on 50% of the savings rather than 30%.

Anneliese Dodds: Has the Department conducted any kind of cost-benefit analysis of the measure’s overall impact? In practice, it is leading to additional health and education costs, and to huge impacts on families that have to be sucked up by already strapped local authorities. Has there been any kind of 360° review of the measure’s overall impact across Government, including local government, and not just on the benefits bill?

Will Quince: I have been a Minister for only three months and I keep all the policies in my remit at the Department under very close review. I regularly meet and have conversations with key stakeholders in policy areas such as this, to ensure that we are aware where policies are and are not working, and that we are alive to the issues. It will not come as a surprise to the hon. Lady that stakeholders in this area have flagged LHA rates as an issue. That is why we are looking at it very closely indeed.

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

In addition to that targeted affordability funding, the Government have provided more than £1 billion in discretionary housing payments to local authorities since 2011, which the hon. Member for Westminster North referred to. Discretionary housing payments allow local authorities to protect the most vulnerable claimants and support households affected by different welfare reforms, including the freeze to the LHA.

Ms Buck: The whole point of discretionary housing payments is that they are temporary, so they do not provide a solution to any of these problems.

Will Quince: Discretionary housing payments are a tool that is available—

Ms Buck: A temporary one.

Will Quince: Not necessarily. They have been available since 2011, and more than £1 billion has been made available to local authorities. Quite intentionally, we allow local authorities discretion on how it is used, and they use that money and use it well. There is an underspend in a number of local authorities, but it is a tool used by many local authorities to prevent homelessness. Where individuals or families are at risk of homelessness, local authorities will use DHPs to protect tenancies.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) has raised the point about broad rental market areas a few times; I note his concerns about the broad rental market area boundaries in Stroud and the wider area. As with all policies, we keep that under review, and I am looking at this very closely. I hope the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that any reform of the policy would be a significant and complex undertaking, given that there are 192 broad market rental areas across England, Scotland and Wales. We should be aware that any changes to the BMRAs and their boundaries are likely to create both winners and losers, so I have to give very careful consideration to the potential impact.

The hon. Gentleman also raised a point about “No DSS”—landlords not renting to those in receipt of benefits. The Prime Minister and No. 10 have taken that issue very seriously. I attended a recent roundtable with a number of stakeholders and we are working very closely with the Residential Landlords Association. Part of the issue is mortgage lenders and insurers. More and more mortgage lenders are now reducing or removing their restrictions on renting to those in the receipt of benefits—Metro Bank is the most recent addition to that list. There are a few still to go, and we still have to tackle the insurance market, as some insurance policies still do not allow people who buy to let to rent to those in receipt of benefits. We are looking at that area closely and are working with key stakeholders, because we very much want to fix this—to break the myth and challenge

[*Will Quince*]

the ignorant belief that those in receipt of benefits are riskier tenants than those who are not, because it is absolutely untrue.

The hon. Member for Ealing, Southall also raised temporary accommodation. With other Government Departments, we are working to assess what more can be done to address the number of people in temporary accommodation. Time spent in temporary accommodation means that people are getting help and ensures that no family is without a roof over their heads. The Government have targeted funding streams focused on reducing the number of households in temporary accommodation as part of our £1.2 billion spending plan.

Liam Byrne: While the Minister is being constructive and generous, and before he finishes, could he undertake to try to secure an explanation as to why the £211 million promised to the West Midlands Combined Authority when it was set up has not yet been paid over? Could he do that before the reshuffle?

Will Quince: The right hon. Gentleman tempts me down a road that is wholly outside my remit. That is a question for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and my counterpart or the Housing Minister in that Department. The right hon. Gentleman knows that he has tools in his arsenal—he can write to that Minister or secure an Adjournment debate, or he could catch the Minister around the Estate later on to ask that question. If I see him, I will raise it, but I think the right hon. Gentleman might be able to find his own salvation by raising it personally with the relevant Minister.

Andrew Selous: Can I take the Minister back to the point about mortgage lenders and difficulties in lending to people on benefits? Will his officials have a look at what has happened in France recently? My understanding is that, certainly in previous years, the French Government set up a system for people on benefits and low incomes to get on the housing ladder in association with a number of French banks. We should study that to see if there are any lessons for us in the UK. Would he undertake to ask his officials to have a look at that system?

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention; I was not aware of that scheme and will certainly look at it—it sounds very interesting. Subject to being in post in 24 or 48 hours, I will certainly commit to looking at that and to coming back to him with my thoughts.

Numerous Members, including the hon. Members for Ealing, Southall, and for Westminster North, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and the hon. Member for Argyll and

Bute (Brendan O'Hara), all raised the issue of housing for social rent. This is also an area that I am hugely passionate about. Local housing allowance rates and debates such as this are only half of the story. We must look at how we can increase the supply of housing that is affordable to people on low incomes to create a more sustainable system over the longer term.

I am keen to continue my work with colleagues in MHCLG to support them in looking at how we can increase the supply of housing for social and affordable rent and what more my Department might be able to do to achieve that. I urge my hon. Friends and hon. Members—not that I am supposed to—to address the issue of housing supply with my counterparts in MHCLG and to lobby accordingly. It is a hugely important issue. I share the thoughts of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire when he says that at the heart of the route for tackling poverty, improving health outcomes and improving educational attainment and employability is a secure and stable home, and that is something that we should prioritise.

Alex Cunningham: It is going to take some time to build the houses required. In the meantime, we need the local housing allowance to be properly addressed. The evidence has shown that it is inadequate, yet in some areas there is an underspend. What is the Minister going to do to review that and to transfer the money to where there is a greater need?

Will Quince: I made it clear at the beginning that this is an area that I am looking at very closely. We are committed to providing a strong safety net for those who need it and that is why we continue to spend more than £95 billion a year on welfare benefits for people of working age. There are no current plans to extend or maintain the benefits freeze after March 2020. As I said at the beginning, specific decisions on how to uprate the local housing allowance rates from April 2020 will form part of the discussions in support of fiscal events later this year.

10.58 am

Mr Virendra Sharma: Looking at the time, I do not think I will be able to respond to each and every point, so I thank collectively all right hon. and hon. Members who contributed to the debate. I am glad to see the passion and commitment that the Minister has shown for the subject, and I hope that he will retain his position tomorrow and carry on. Otherwise, there are other routes he can follow to make sure that we carry on fighting for the rights of those who are vulnerable in our society. I thank you, Mr Bailey, for your chairmanship.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered local housing allowance and homelessness.

Flitwick Station: Step-free Access

11 am

Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered step-free access at Flitwick station.

Nineteenth-century engineers thought very little of laying a railway line in a cutting through the centre of an old market town; that was no obstacle. Sadly, they thought even less about how disabled people could access the platforms in that cutting. I thought that our modern attitudes had changed and moved on, and that we were more considerate of the less able in society, but I am afraid that there is no evidence of that at Flitwick station.

My constituent Darren, who is a severely disabled man and a wheelchair user, is one of the worst affected. He cannot hope to get on a train from a station that is only a few hundred yards away from his home. I will explain a bit about Darren, who I think might be watching. Darren was a very able professional man who used Flitwick station every day to commute to work. In an act of generosity, he once helped somebody to move house, and an obstacle fell off the back of the flatbed lorry they were using while Darren was tying his shoelaces. He broke his spine and has been a paraplegic ever since, but he would still like to use Flitwick station.

I felt incredibly humbled when Darren turned up one day here at Westminster. In his mobility wheelchair, with his suction and everything else, he had decided to bring himself to Parliament to see me. The effort it took him to get here is possibly the reason why I will never give up fighting for people such as Darren to have the disabled access that they need in order to live as normal and able a commuter life as possible, so that they can get to shops and do the things that they used to do before they were unable to access Flitwick station.

I am also talking about older people, young mums with prams and people with suitcases visiting the Centre Parcs in my constituency. The local campaign to get step-free access at Flitwick station has been determined in the face of seemingly endless delays and prevarication. Particular mention has to go to Arthur Taylor of the Bedfordshire Commuters Association, to the cross-party Bedfordshire Rail Access Network and to the efforts of Flitwick Town and unitary councillors, who are sitting in the Public Gallery. I also want to mention an honourable and good friend of mine, Fiona Chapman—her successor from the ward is in the Gallery.

The hopes of so many people in Flitwick and its surrounding towns and villages were focused on the Access for All funding, but they were dashed in April when the scheme announced its results. We all thought the case for step-free access at Flitwick was strong. Over 1.5 million people use the station each year, with 4.5% growth as the local area goes through a period of sustained house building. Much more is still to come. We have seen investment in lengthening the platforms, which has happened during my time as an MP over the past 15 years, and the purchase of new trains. In fact, it is very rare for a train that does not have 12 carriages to pass through Flitwick station. However, nothing has

been done to enable the disabled and elderly to use the station, despite the upgrading of platforms and train carriages.

In addition to the number of passengers, Flitwick's case for step-free access is strengthened by the lack of alternative means of travel. Disabled people who wish to travel from Flitwick must call 24 hours in advance, which is exactly what Darren did. A taxi will be booked to take them to the nearest step-free station—at least, that is how it should work. More often than not, there will be no taxi waiting when my disabled constituents arrive at Flitwick station, despite their having telephoned 24 hours in advance. There is occasionally a taxi waiting, but it is unable to take wheelchairs. There are unfortunately few buses from Flitwick, and most of them are not wheelchair-accessible either. For a large number of people, transport options are either strictly limited or absolutely non-existent.

For all those reasons and more, Flitwick station was the top priority for Govia Thameslink Railway, the relevant train operating company, in the last round of Access for All funding—or so it said. However, the funding was not enough. Govia Thameslink Railway said Flitwick was its priority station, but apparently it is not. By comparison with Flitwick, Cricklewood station has lower footfall, lower growth and better alternatives for less-able passengers, but it was awarded money from the Access for All funding. I do not know anybody who understands the rationale for that, other than it costs less money to adapt Cricklewood station. The train operating companies and the Department for Transport decided to go for the lower hanging fruit. For them, it is a numbers game: how many stations can we adapt for how little money?

We all know that Flitwick is a geographical challenge because of where it is situated—the elevations and the number of steps that one needs to go down to reach the platforms at the station. It is obviously an engineering challenge and would therefore be slightly more expensive. However, it would not be an obstacle to the Victorian engineers who built the station—they would think nothing of being asked to make the station accessible for wheelchair users or disabled people. It would not be a challenge to Victorian engineers, who would just get on and do it, but it is apparently too much for us to adapt a station that is slightly challenging in terms of its elevation, geography and current accessibility. We all know the reasons why.

The train operating company directs all inquiries to the Department for Transport. The Access for All administrators have refused to answer any questions put to them by my constituents and other people—believe me, there have been a lot—who have inquired about why Flitwick was missed out of the programme. The fragmentation, lack of information and lack of communication between the Department of Transport, the train operating companies and the relevant interested bodies in my constituency, including Flitwick Town Council, have led to bad feelings. There was absolute frustration in my constituency, because the one station that everyone—not just in Bedfordshire, but in the entire eastern region—thought required funding and adaptation was Flitwick, due to the house building and established growth. That is not growth that we are predicting: 4.5% growth is happening right now.

[*Ms Nadine Dorries*]

Look at our local plan and the aspirations of Central Bedfordshire Council for inward investment already deciding to come to the area, close to Flitwick station. A great deal of house building will take place close to Flitwick station. A number of new commuters are about to come and live close to it. A number of businesses are about to relocate to areas such as Henlow and others, close to Flitwick station. It is not imaginary growth. Central Bedfordshire Council was able to confirm the level of growth that we will have going forward, but the one station in the entire region that requires funding was left off.

I have spoken to the Minister about this issue in the past, and there is some confusion. The Department for Transport blames the train operating companies, and the train operating companies blame the Department for Transport. The Department says, “We adapted the stations that the train operating companies told us to adapt,” and the train operating companies say, “You were top of our list, but the Department for Transport decided not to do it.” That is the problem facing us at the moment.

I would like a clear response that my councillors, who are sitting in the Public Gallery, can take back to Flitwick, saying, “This is the situation with regard to Flitwick station. This is why it didn’t happen. This is why it is going to happen in the future, and this is when it is going to happen.”

We all understand the logistical challenge of adapting Flitwick. We all understand that we would have to go through a period when the station might even have to close for a while, and I have been told that the civil engineering problem there might even mean that the centre of Flitwick would close for a while. I do not think that we regard that as a problem, because the eventual outcome would be worth it. It is something that we could explain easily to my constituents, our residents, because the equality of access has to be there for people such as Darren.

Everyone has a right to be able to travel, in particular in an area with poor transport links—bus links and the whole transport structure are poor. Flitwick station and that Bedford-to-St Pancras line—known as “the Bedpan line”—offer a life-giving artery for people to access work, pleasure and travel in all its aspects. It is such a well used line, but an entire group of my constituents is denied those ordinary daily rights of employment, pleasure and travel that people such as me and my councillors have access to and enjoy.

At the start, I said that I would always see access for disabled people through the eyes of Darren—the eyes of a man who worked and lived the commuter life, a professional life, that is now denied him because he is unable to travel. This is not a man who wants to sit at home; this is a man who wants to get out, to go to the train station, to travel to London and to enjoy things that every able-bodied person is able to enjoy. But that is all denied him because of lack of access at Flitwick station. That is the truth of the matter. I have also seen women struggling up and down the steps with babies in prams. Despite the bus, sometimes I see people struggling up with suitcases to get taxis or on to the main street. This cannot go on for much longer.

Flitwick station is 50 miles outside London, most of my constituents are commuters and most of my disabled constituents want to work, so I now ask the Minister for some specific answers. When will it happen? Why did it not happen before? That is the question everyone is asking—why did it not happen? We need to have communicated to us today a clear trajectory towards a situation in which those people can access the travel rights that the rest of us have. At the moment, all we have is a lack of communication, as well as confusion, frustration—and, from some people, a certain amount of anger.

11.13 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) on securing this important debate, which gives us the opportunity for us to discuss accessibility. I want to acknowledge on the record her passionate and ongoing campaigning not only on behalf of her constituency but for accessibility across our rail network. I was moved to hear her talk about her constituent Darren, and I hope that my hon. Friend will never give up campaigning on behalf of her disabled passengers. As I continue, I hope that she will believe the evidence that we are committed to assuring accessibility across our transport system. I am committed as she is, and I will try to explain what happened in her particular case and what we are doing throughout the country.

My hon. Friend is aware of the Department for Transport’s inclusive transport strategy, and she has campaigned incredibly hard to ensure that her constituency gets as many resources as possible. The strategy is incredibly ambitious, and I believe it to be the first national strategy determined to deliver accessibility by 2030, which is the United Nations goal. She is right that we are dealing with very old infrastructure, which remains a barrier to disabled people accessing our rail network. We need to work with them, Network Rail and the train operating companies to ensure that accessibility is a priority.

We are discussing Flitwick station, which was nominated for the Access for All programme, but was not successful. My hon. Friend found that decision difficult to accept because she had worked incredibly hard on the best bid possible, but the funding was heavily oversubscribed. We had well over 300 nominations for the programme, and significantly more stations required our support—I will go through the reasons. The Flitwick nomination was good, and I hope for another round of funding in which she can secure a new bid, but it was not successful in the previous round.

We could compare Flitwick with lots of other stations, but I do not want to confuse my hon. Friend or her councillors, who are listening to the debate. They must put the best bid together in future. It is a competitive process, with criteria. Train operating companies also have the opportunity to nominate their top priorities—for example, Biggleswade was a top priority for Great Northern—although that is not the only criterion.

We also have to look at the broad spectrum of accessibility in a region. Twenty-one stations were nominated by Thameslink with a priority rating. The

train operating company's second priority was Mill Hill Broadway, with two other stations nominated, Catford and Cricklewood, which were more successful in the bidding despite being lower ranked than Flitwick by the company. There were, however, other factors, which I will explain. My hon. Friend will want to work as closely as she can with the train operating company and the local authority to ensure that the next bid is successful.

At present, I am told that six of the eight stations in my hon. Friend's constituency are step-free, which is no doubt a great deal down to her campaigning. As we have discussed, a lot of that infrastructure is Victorian, but 75% of journeys are already step-free. We want to increase that figure, which is why the inclusive transport strategy had funding of £300 million available to help stations improve. A lot of those stations were deferred from the 2016 Hendy review to the Network Rail delivery programme, and new stations were accepted as well. In total, therefore, 73 stations will receive funding to ensure that they are step-free.

Nominated stations were selected on the basis of annual footfall, weighted by the incidence of disability in the area. We considered other local factors such as proximity to a hospital and, fundamentally, the availability of third-party funding for the project. It was also important to ensure a fair geographical spread of projects across the country. All those points are noted when a grid is put together.

Third-party funding is especially important in weighting a business case. Many of the selected stations had bids that included significant match-funding contributions, which often came from the local authority but also from the train operating company. I hope that my hon. Friend will take on board the fact that we have released a new tier of funding—£20 million now available for the Access for All mid-tier programme—which was launched on 8 July and is open to nominations right now. I urge her to put in another bid, ensuring that she works with the train operating company and the local authority. I cannot emphasise this enough: significant third-party funding for the project would help.

A few weeks ago, I wrote to all right hon. and hon. Members, encouraging them to contact their train operating companies if they wanted their stations to be included in that programme of work. I can only apologise if my hon. Friend is getting mixed messages from my Department, and I am disappointed that the train operating company has not made it clear how the whole package has to be presented, not just nominations. However, we—not only I—look forward to the train operating company nominating Flitwick station, and I hope that she can go back to her constituency and put together a package of support from the local authority, to ensure that the station gets a higher rating than it did previously.

I will now reflect on some of the points made by my hon. Friend on behalf of her constituent Darren. Within the inclusive transport strategy, we have ambitious plans to ensure that disabled passengers are dealt with with the care and dignity that they deserve. My hon. Friend mentioned taxis being called, which is part of the disabled person's protection policy. It is absolutely right that a person should be able to carry on their journey. It is illegal for taxis not to take disabled passengers onboard, to take umbrage at taking wheelchairs or to charge any extra for taking on disabled passengers. I urge my hon. Friend or her constituent Darren to write to

me—immediately, considering where we are right now—so I can keep an eye on the taxi firm and how that could have occurred. She closely follows the issues of her disabled constituents.

Ms Dorries: May I add some nuance? Some constituents such as Darren are not just in wheelchairs but in huge, motorised, supportive wheelchairs that enable people to sit up and move. It is not a case of just a wheelchair but much more, making it more difficult.

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend makes an important point, but the facts remain the same: all operators have a disabled people's protection policy, and it is their duty to ensure that disabled passengers can continue their journey and to provide the right sort of taxi for them to continue that journey. But who wants to complain religiously when they are being let down by a service? That is why we are working with the Rail Delivery Group to ensure that Passenger Assist becomes a far more interactive, real-time application and to make it easier to make complaints, so that we can hold train operating companies to account.

Passenger Assist is a service that does good work, but it is not as real-time as my hon. Friend and I would like it to be. Hopefully, that will be delivered by the end of the year. We are working to make sure that the rail network is more accessible, and I have supported the industry's establishment of an independent rail ombudsman with powers to deal with unresolved passenger complaints. I have made it clear to the Office of Rail and Road that it needs to ensure that disabled passengers' complaints are heard and their expectation of services is met. Through the inclusive transport strategy, we will have a grading system to look at the train operating companies that do well and those that fail to deliver a standard that the rest of us enjoy.

I hope that my hon. Friend can take on board all the advice that I have given and will take it back to her councillors, to ensure an even stronger bid. She has worked incredibly hard, even before I was the Minister for rail accessibility; her reputation is very strong in the Department for Transport, thanks to her campaigning on behalf of her constituents. We will look forward to the bid coming in, but my hon. Friend must not forget to ensure that it is nominated strongly by the train operating company and the bid has some matched funding.

I hope that my hon. Friend will agree with me that even though the infrastructure is not perfect, and even though we have a long way to go, with the inclusive transport strategy and the £300 million that we have made available recently, we are doing everything we can to ensure that accessibility is not a barrier to people with disability accessing our rail network. I could talk about many other commitments that we have made through the inclusive transport strategy, but they will not necessarily affect the rail network.

Ms Dorries: Can the Minister give some further clarification? Obviously, we will reapply for the fund—I think that is already underway. We are having discussions with Central Bedfordshire Council about third-party matched funding. I am aware that we need increased matched funding in place, and I am sure that Flitwick Town Council will make that case, too.

[*Ms Dorries*]

I hope that the Minister will still be in post at the end of this week, if not in a more elevated post, but I am sure there will be continuity of her work. She mentioned matched funding and the other elements, but I do not take the case of comparability with other stations, because ours tops all the lists. If she is in post, can she ensure that the considerable engineering challenge of adapting Flitwick station and the cost of that does not preclude us? The Department could probably adapt five stations for what it will take to adapt Flitwick, but I do not want that to be a barrier to the rights of our disabled passengers.

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Let me be clear: when we put together the grid to see which stations to support, we do not look at the complexity of transforming those stations to make them accessible. At that point, we do not know the cost. That is why we do not say at the beginning that the £300 million will support 50 stations. We try to make sure that it supports as many stations that get the most points according to the criteria: high footfall, levels of disability in the area, accessibility issues, other concerns such as local schools and hospitals, whether there is a disability centre or an old persons' home nearby, or whether there are events throughout the year where the footfall increases incredibly. All those factors are taken into account.

In my experience as Accessibility Minister, I have not been in a meeting in which we have thought that something was too difficult to do. That is not the point. We are trying to do as many stations as we can that are accessed by a high number of people with disabilities, as well as all the other added elements. My hon. Friend can take that back to her constituency and tell them that the complexity of the station is not the key. In the next round of funding, the key is to be nominated top by the train operating company, to put forward a proposal that is supported by both the town and council and any other local authority that will be involved in planning, and to have some matched funding. It is about putting the best, most robust case forward, with all the added elements of people trying to access that station—with or without a wheelchair—and any other accessibility issues, whether parents with a buggy or persons with sight loss. In the last round of funding, there was a remarkable number of stations that had substantial amounts of matched funding. I would like her to take that away.

I hope that my hon. Friend will continue to campaign for accessibility in her constituency and will hold my Department to account, regardless of who the Minister for accessibility is, to ensure that the inclusive transport strategy continues to roll forward. Even though 75% of journeys are step-free, we will not be satisfied until 100% are. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend in her next bid for a round of funding.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.

Female Offender Strategy: One Year On

[*JOAN RYAN in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the female offender strategy one year on.

It is a pleasure to open this debate under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I start by thanking the charity Women in Prison, which visited Parliament earlier this month to lobby MPs and to speak about its #OPENUP campaign, along with my own women's centre, WomenMATTA, the Howard League for Penal Reform, the Prison Reform Trust, Crest Advisory, the Magistrates Association, of which I am a life member, and women who have told me stories of their experience of criminal justice over the years. I also thank National Prison Radio, which is carrying a report of this debate because it knows that women in our prisons take great interest in the policy decisions we make here that affect them.

The House has long taken an interest in female offenders, especially since the seminal report by my noble Friend Baroness Corston in 2007. That report highlighted the special circumstances surrounding women's offending behaviour and the fact that many women who offend have a history of trauma and are vulnerable. The Government's female offender strategy, published last year, recognised that these important factors underpinned women's offending and that custody should be a last resort. It was welcome, if late in coming. The strategy included a number of positive measures to encourage the use of alternatives to custody and to help to address the causes of women's offending, with a focus on early intervention.

Thanks to the Corston report, we already know a lot about the characteristics of women offenders. We know that their needs are often highly complex. Issues include substance misuse and poor levels of education and employment, and many have been victims of abuse themselves. Some 60% of women offenders have experienced domestic abuse, according to the Prison Reform Trust. Many have a history of self-harm and 49% of women prisoners report mental health needs, including anxiety, depression and psychosis. Crucially, many women in our penal system are mothers; over half the women in prison have dependent children. The Prison Reform Trust says that that means around 17,000 children a year will be affected by having a mother spending time in prison.

How do these women come into the criminal justice system? The obvious route is that they will be arrested by the police and taken through the process. Indeed, 103,000 women were arrested by the police in 2017-18. Strikingly, black women were twice as likely as others to be arrested. The most common offences include theft and fraud; shoplifting accounts for 43% of those sentenced for indictable or either-way offences.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and on the speech she is making. On that point, women are disproportionately represented in the prosecution of

offences such as non-payment of council tax or TV licences and truancy. Does she agree that we need to end the punishment and prosecution of poverty?

Kate Green: I do agree, and indeed my hon. Friend makes the important point that not all cases that come into the criminal justice system come via the police. They might come via other prosecution routes. Women are disproportionately likely to be represented in those routes. For example, 70% of those sentenced for TV licence offences are women. That disproportionality is also seen in relation to offences such as council tax fraud and truancy.

Most important of all, in terms of the characteristics of women offenders, is the fact that the vast majority are not violent. Crest Advisory has shown that 83% of women in prison are imprisoned for non-violent offences.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way, but that is clearly not true. According to the Ministry of Justice figures, of the 3,294 women in prison, 943 were imprisoned for violence against the person. That is almost a third, and over a third of that number were in prison for homicide. Quite clearly, the figures she cites are invented and they are not actually true, are they? Can she stick to the official figures, please?

Kate Green: It is important to recognise the circumstances in which women commit offences, the nature of the violence and offences against the person for which they may be convicted, and the level of violence and threat that these women present to society. I will certainly look again at the figures that I have been given, because clearly they are widely different from the figures the hon. Gentleman quotes. I am not disputing his figures; I will check my source. In my experience, the women I have met in prison are more of a danger to themselves than to anybody outside custody.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Has my hon. Friend seen another set of statistics, which are taken from work done at Drake Hall women's prison in Staffordshire? Some 64% of women prisoners who had been screened for brain injury showed up as having had a brain injury before their first offence. Their brain injury was likely to have been part of what led to their offending behaviour in the first place. Some 62% of those brain injuries had been caused by domestic violence. Is there not a real danger that the original victim of the crime is ending up in the criminal justice system quite unfairly?

Kate Green: My hon. Friend makes a good point; we know that traumatic brain injury is one of the routes by which women come into custody, and we see disproportionate representation of women with brain injury inside our prisons.

What sentences do women receive? Fines are most common and their use has been increasing. They are often seen by criminal justice practitioners as an effective and swift means of justice. But as the Magistrates Association points out, many women cannot afford to pay the fines that are imposed, which leads them into debt or pressures them into reoffending.

By contrast, the use of community penalties has been falling since 2015, with community penalties representing only 5% of sentences received by women, which is half the rate we saw a decade ago. While there has been a

welcome fall in the number of women sentenced to custody, three quarters of those who received custodial sentences were imprisoned for a period of less than 12 months. I believe that short custodial sentences have been shown not to be effective and not a good use of money. Some 70.6% of women receiving a custodial sentence of under 12 months in the period from April to June 2016 went on to reoffend. Such sentences are not achieving a reduction in reoffending.

Many women are in custody now as a result of being recalled to prison following release and during a period of post-release supervision. That has been exacerbated by transforming rehabilitation changes, which introduced post-release supervision for those who had served short custodial sentences. In practice, the failure of such supervision arrangements to recognise women's caring responsibilities, their lack of access to transport and their anxiety about leaving the house is leading many women to miss appointments. They are therefore in breach of the terms of their release and find themselves going back in through the revolving door of recall.

I contend that our system is clearly not working for women or for wider society. That was understood by the Government too, because the 2018 female offender strategy sought to address a number of those concerns and issues. What specifically did the strategy introduce? It introduced some £5 million over two years for investment in community provision, including £2 million for programmes to address domestic abuse, and a pilot to introduce five residential women's centres. The strategy was explicit in its ambition to reduce the number of short custodial sentences served by women. It introduced new guidance for the police on dealing with vulnerability, and guidance on whole-system approaches, such as we have had for a number of years in my home city of Manchester. It also sought to introduce a national concordat on women offenders.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the £5 million is wholly inadequate? I have heard from Nottingham Women's Centre, which provides the CHANGES—Creating Hope, Achieving New Goals, Experiencing Success—programme for women who are leaving prison, or to help women to avoid prison. It says that

“we had a total of 12 days to bid for the money with a partner. We ended up being funded for a six week pilot project.”

The total amount that it received was just over £11,000. The representative of the women's centre said:

“The evaluation was so huge for a tiny piece of work...we are being asked to track the women after the end of the project for the next 6 months too. I would say if anything it detracted from our work rather than increased our offer and certainly hasn't helped to shore up what we already have.”

It simply is not fit for purpose.

Kate Green: WomenMATTER, which is my local women's centre, has also spoken of the inadequacy of funding, which I will come on to, and of the complexity of the application procedures. As my hon. Friend rightly suggests, spending time on preparing the applications detracts from the good work that the centres could be doing in working directly with women offenders.

On 27 June, in a written ministerial statement, the Government set out progress to date. I am grateful to the Prison Reform Trust, which has produced a helpful

[*Kate Green*]

and comprehensive matrix to track progress against the strategy. It is fair to say that both documents show a mixed picture, although I acknowledge that there has been some good progress. For example, we have recently had the Farmer report on maintaining family links, which makes many welcome suggestions. We have had changes in housing policy so that a tenancy can be maintained for up to six months while a mother is in prison. More police forces are developing and using trauma-informed approaches. Liaison and diversion schemes now cover 90% of forces in the country, and the ambition is to achieve 100% coverage next year.

I was very pleased to hear the right hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke), the last Lord Chancellor—and, if I may say so, a much-missed Lord Chancellor—speaking positively about his intention or wish to see a presumption against the imposition of short custodial sentences, as already applies in Scotland. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) says, women's centres still lack sustainable funding. Will the Minister say what has happened to the proceeds from the sale of Holloway Prison? That delivered some £80 million into the Treasury's coffers, but only £5 million appears to have been released to go towards services for women.

It is welcome that the Government, in their strategy, called a halt to the building of new women's prisons. Many of us had spent much time urging them to take exactly that step. But what evidence can the Minister show for the efficacy of residential women's centres? Surely priority should be given to funding core women's centre provision in the community. No prison has to wonder whether it will have the funding to exist after 2021, but that is the case for most women's centres, with Lord Farmer himself describing their funding as “desperately precarious”.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work in this area, on which she has campaigned over many years. With regard to the location of women's centres, she will be aware that Wales does not have any women's centre; it does not have a women's prison. To be clear, we do not want a women's prison, but we are in desperate need of a women's centre, because the closest place that women can go to, in terms of custodial sentences, is Gloucestershire. Does she agree that, in addition to her list of questions for the Minister, he might want to consider the fact that a women's centre is desperately needed in Wales and would be an important part of improving outcomes for female offenders?

Kate Green: I do agree. If there is no women's centre in Wales, that is shocking and there needs to be. Indeed, I would say that for any part of the country that does not have a women's centre.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): May I build on what my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) said? For Eastwood Park Prison—it is just outside my constituency, but I visit regularly—the problem now is that because there are a number of women's centres growing up in the west, there is a disparity with those places that do not have women's centres, particularly

south Wales. It should be remembered that that prison covers the whole of the south-west as well as south Wales. There is such a difference in the ways in which women being released are now treated. We have to get some continuity in the way in which they are looked after, but more particularly some certainty that women's centres will develop all over the country. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Kate Green: I agree both that we need women's centres to develop all over the country and that they need certainty of funding so that they are sustainable.

We have seen other problems with delivery of the strategy. I hope that the Minister will forgive me if I describe the transforming rehabilitation programme as a total failure. It has not been able to deliver, for example, specialist provision for women through community rehabilitation companies, and at the moment we do not know what the new probation model will look like for women. Through the Gate simply has not happened as envisaged.

There are even basic things such as women not being able to apply for universal credit in advance of their release date, or to apply for housing. They will not get a house because they do not have their children living with them, which means that they cannot have their children living with them because they do not have a house when they are released. It is the case that 13% of women are released to no fixed abode—a truly terrifying prospect—and only 22% to secure permanent accommodation, according to Her Majesty's inspectors of prison and probation. As a result of the lack of a safe destination to release women to, many will be forced to return to the abuser, who may be the root cause of their offending, and will turn to alcohol, drug or other substance misuse and to reoffending.

Pre-sentence reports are still being prepared without full information and without being informed by gender considerations. Sentencers are not always taking account of the interests of children when sentencing a mother to or remanding her in custody, yet the impact on children of a mum going to prison is absolutely dire. Fewer than 10% of children remain in their family home when a mother is imprisoned.

What do we want to happen, and will the Minister offer us assurances that some of these suggestions will happen? First, will he look at what can be done systematically to ensure that the police, wherever possible, divert women away from arrest? That is being considered now by the all-party parliamentary group for women in the penal system, which I have the honour to co-chair with Baroness Corston and the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), whom I am very pleased to see present at this debate.

Will the Minister say what the Government intend to do to spread retail diversion schemes such as we have in Bury, in Greater Manchester, across the country? Will he say how the Government are working with non-police prosecutors, so that we can end the use of custody for TV licence offences, truancy offences and so on?

Crucially, what will the Government do to secure sustainable, adequate funding for community provision and particularly for both women's centres and the range of partners that work with them? Can the Minister say what role he envisages for the new probation service?

How will it develop women-specific programmes, or will women's centres become the default model for provision? What can be done to build sentencer confidence in community provision? I would argue that one step that the Government must take is to ensure proper information for sentencers and proper training for them on the outcomes from community and custodial sentences. Will the Minister ensure that gender-sensitive, gender-informed, pre-sentence reports are made mandatory and that there is suitable training for report writers? Will he say what the Government can do to put more emphasis on, as part of community sentences, treatment orders, including, as the Magistrates Association has suggested, financial planning support?

All stages of the process must take account of the best interests of children, so will the Minister ensure that sentencers do follow the guidance, which exists, that they should consider the impact on children in sentencing a mother and that they should ensure that arrangements are made for them prior to sending any mother into custody? Better still, in my view, would be ensuring that alternatives to custody are considered in all cases for primary carers.

Will the Government now move forward to legislate for a presumption against short sentences as a matter of urgency? Will they also adopt the suggestion, from the Committee that scrutinised what is now the Domestic Abuse Bill, to introduce a statutory defence in that legislation?

When transforming rehabilitation was first proposed, I thought that post-release supervision was a good idea, but having seen it in practice, I have changed my mind. In 2017, about 1,000 women were recalled to prison while on supervision following a custodial sentence of under 12 months. In the context of the female prison population as a whole, that is a lot of women. Its use appears to be ill judged, disproportionate and harmful.

Will the Minister consider ending post-release supervision and replacing it with holistic support, including housing, education, mental health and employment? No woman should ever be released into homelessness—can the Minister guarantee that that will not happen? Can he guarantee that no woman—or man—will ever be released on a Friday, when services are not available on the weekend to receive them? Will he once again press the Department for Work and Pensions to expedite the ability to start the universal credit application process before a woman is released from prison? Finally on my shopping list, will he ensure that a women's centre link worker is placed in every single women's prison?

I urge the Minister to continue the roll-out of the full-system approach across the country, because it works. In Cleveland, where they do not have it, 67 in every 100,000 women offenders are imprisoned, in Greater Manchester it is only 25 per 100,000. A whole-system approach should not be criminal justice driven. We need place-based, gender-informed, holistic preventative services in every local authority accessible to every vulnerable woman. That is the women's strategy I would like to see; I urge the Government to embrace it.

2.51 pm

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), who has long had a passionate interest in

the area of women's justice. I lost count of the number of times that I sat in the Minister's position listening to her make as good a contribution as she has just made.

For those who do not know, I was the Minister responsible for commissioning the women's justice strategy. I held on to that position as long as I could, to see the strategy published before resigning over Brexit. In the end, I could not hold on any longer and it was published two weeks after I resigned. It had been ready for a few months. I was fighting hard—I lost the fight—internally for the funding that the hon. Lady alluded to. I do not blame anyone in particular for that; I blame the broader political scene and its short-termism, in which it is believed to be better to fix a few toilets in a prison than to invest long term to try to reduce the number of women in prison.

In response to likely challenges from my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), I viewed the women's justice strategy as a Trojan horse. The principles underpinning it are applicable to men, but the political reality is that doing it for men is much more difficult, because there are more prisoners in the male estate, and given the types of crimes that men are committing, with a few obvious notable exceptions, managing the media and public opinion is more of a challenge, so I thought it was sensible to concentrate on women first.

In the main Chamber there is currently an urgent question on a youth institution for which I was responsible for two years. The youth justice system is also crying out for a revolution in the way it manages people in custody. I tried to do that, too. I have a deep understanding and respect for the Minister, who faces challenges of trying to reform this area. It is difficult, because it only takes one headline in the newspaper for everyone to get the jitters. As a consequence, it is a tough Department to work in and in which to bring about reform.

This strategy went quite some way towards achieving reform. I would like to put on record my huge admiration for the civil servants involved in the process. We worked extremely hard on this. I view this as the biggest piece of work that I achieved in two years. It involved a hell of a lot of evidence gathering, and I had to visit every women's prison and a number of women's centres across the country. The strategy, which was published last year, was the culmination of a sizeable piece of work and everyone involved in writing it should be congratulated.

When I became a Minister in 2016, the first thing I read was the Corston report. I had already booked a summer holiday when I was appointed Justice Minister. I did not expect to be a Justice Minister, although I am glad that I was, because I think a doctor in the Ministry of Justice was exactly what was required. I took away a lot of things to read that summer. Most people are currently looking at their phones waiting for news of ministerial appointments; I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley is doing so. Those who are appointed should go away and think, and spend two to three weeks reading before immersing themselves in the Department. The problem for Ministers is—with the greatest respect to the civil servants present—that the Department sucks them in and they cannot think, and work out what they want to do and what should be a priority.

When I came back after that summer recess, I decided on three priorities, including women's justice. I inherited a challenged relationship with the women's justice lobby.

[Dr Phillip Lee]

It took time to work on that. Everyone in that group, which used to meet quarterly, worked extremely hard, because we could see that this was the right thing to do on a number of levels. Anyone who visits a women's prison and speaks to prisoners—whatever they have done—is immediately struck by how often they are vulnerable. They often have tell-tale signs of self-harm on their wrists, poor eye contact and a history of coercive relationships, domestic abuse and drug use. Often, as has been alluded to, they tend to be those who are charged for not paying utility bills because they are the homemaker, so their name is on the account and they are disproportionately affected when those bills are not paid.

Visiting those institutions, one thinks, “If they have done things wrong, there needs to be a punitive element.” In fact, I have never met a female prisoner who has not admitted that they have done something wrong and accepted that there should be a punitive element to their sentence. However, prison and custody must be a road back to not offending, and that is quite clearly where we fall down, not just in the women's system but in the men's and, particularly, the youth system. Every time I came away from visits to those institutions, I thought to myself, “Continuing to do the same thing is the definition of madness.” We have to try to find a way of making these women law-abiding citizens, supporting them in that process and breaking the cycle that means their children are disproportionately likely to become offenders too.

The idea that came about was residential women's centres, which is within the strategy; suffice it to say that it was going to have a more prominent place there. The original plan was to build 10 women's centres, including one in Wales—I say that for all the Welsh Members of Parliament who are present. We recognised that there were some regional disparities in the provision of services for women offenders, which the strategy sought to address.

We also wanted to explore a different way of funding public services, and we got some way with that idea, but it never made it into the strategy. I think private finance initiatives are a disgrace. I was responsible for one particular PFI contract as a Minister—there is a former Minister present who knows which contract I am referring to—which was signed under the Labour Government 12 or 13 years ago. I did not want to go down that path of a quick fix and building some new buildings. Rather, I wanted to put in place something that was sustainable. I had some pretty detailed conversations with charities and philanthropic donors about them covering the capital investment, while the Government would have been responsible for the revenue costs. The idea was that if I could persuade various institutions to build or to extend existing institutions that are often charitable, the Government could step in and guarantee the maintenance costs. I think the idea has merit across Government and I was frustrated at how difficult it was to get people in the room to discuss the concept. The original plan was to do some match funding across the country and to commit revenue. We thought we could create a virtuous circle—starting with 10, moving on to 15 buildings—and, at the same time, selling off prisons that would have been released, as the number of people in prison was going to fall away.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Order. May I remind the hon. Gentleman that six other Members have applied to speak in this debate? If he speaks for much longer, they will have less than four minutes each to speak.

Dr Lee: Okay. Forgive me; I was not aware of that fact. My point is that a hell of a lot of thought went into the strategy, most of which made it to publication.

If we could make progress in this space with women—reducing the prison population by half by 2030 was my internal private target—and if we could make a success of it, we could move into the male estate and apply exactly the same approach and principles and reduce our prison population across the board. That requires some thought on sentencing, tagging and various other punitive in-the-community options. It is difficult because of an uptick in violent and sexual crimes among men and women in recent years, which we obviously must address, but if we were to do this, we would get to a situation where our prison system, for men, women and young people, would be functioning, and doing what it should be doing—rehabilitating. Then we would get to a society with reduced crime and, more broadly, a society that we could all be proud of.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Hon. Members have roughly four minutes each to speak. I call Chris Ruane.

3.2 pm

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): I welcome this debate, which has been sponsored by my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green). There is a cross-party dynamic here today and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), who progressed this issue during the two years that he was in post. I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke), who I am reliably informed has just resigned. Their approach got buy-in from across the political divide.

I had the fortune, although perhaps “misfortune” is the word, to visit a women's prison, at Eastwood in Gloucestershire, with the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs about 10 or 12 years ago. It was a depressing experience. The women in the prison freely gave evidence through their dinner time; they were rewarded by getting leftovers for their meal. We sent them a box of House of Commons chocolates as a reward, and they were not even allowed to receive that present. We need to treat all those who are in the criminal justice system with respect.

There is compelling evidence to indicate that custodial sentences of six months or less do not work. The Government have, at last, recognised that and have proposed to do something about it.

All women in prison are disadvantaged, but women in Wales are doubly so. Throughout 2016, 62% of sentenced women entering prison across England and Wales were serving sentences of six months or less. The comparable figure for men was 45%. In Wales, a massive 74% of women prisoners are serving sentences of six months or less. The cost of keeping a person in jail is a massive £50,000 a year. Some of those women are in jail for not paying their TV licence. It is £154 for TV licence; it costs £150 a day to keep that woman in jail. Women are put in jail for not paying their council tax. I am really pleased that the Welsh Government took the initiative earlier this year not to pursue people who have not paid their council tax for a custodial sentence.

I pay tribute to the women's centre in Rhyl, run by the wonderful Gemma Fox: it does fantastic work on a shoestring budget. She only has about nine volunteers at the moment, and they look after 300 women a year. One hundred of those women have gone through the penal system. The women's centre is not given the resources it should be, and more women are ending up in custody; in fact, North Wales is the worst police authority of the 43 in the country for sending women to prison.

Some 80% of austerity cuts have ended up on the shoulders of women. That has a consequential effect on their world view and on their ability to provide for their families. As a last resort, many of them have committed crimes, such as shoplifting or not paying their bills, and they have ended up in prison because of that.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that one of the reasons why women end up in such positions is that they are not receiving the benefits that they are entitled to? Nottingham Women's Centre told me that, in the last 12 months, its welfare rights adviser recovered £463,000 in benefits that had been lost to women. Would it not help if we sorted that problem out?

Chris Ruane: Absolutely, and I will finish on this note. The women's centre in Rhyl is not just for female prisoners or women going into or coming out of the criminal justice system. It has a holistic approach to giving advice to women on parenting, domestic and sexual abuse, housing issues, finance and employment. Women go there to recover their confidence. There is a social mix there, with middle-class women as well as working-class women and those who have no job. These centres should be funded by central Government, not least with the £80 million that was saved from Holloway.

It says in the Bible that people should "beat their swords into ploughshares".

We should be turning our women's prisons into women's community centres.

3.6 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I will be brief. I want to urge the Minister to preside over a system where the courts are blind to the gender of a defendant and blind to their race or their sexuality. I was brought up with the belief that everybody was equal before the law, and that is the system that I want the Minister to preside over. It quite clearly is not the case at the moment. For every single category of offence—every single one, according to the Ministry of Justice's own figures—a woman is less likely to be sent to prison than a man, is likely to be sent to prison for a shorter period and will spend less of their sentence in prison.

We have today a "belief in equality only when it suits" brigade. They do not want equality in sentencing or how the courts deal with people. They want to plead for special circumstances. All the things that the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) said at the outset about women in prison with trauma, mental health problems, domestic abuse or self-harm issues apply to many male prisoners in exactly the same way. This is not unique to female prisoners. Many male prisoners have exactly the same troubled backgrounds.

She also talked about children—when sentencing, the impact on children should be considered when sentencing mothers. What about considering the impact of sentencing fathers on those children? Men have children too. Many women, it has to be said, have already had their kids taken off them before they are sent to prison because they are unfit to be mothers, according to the Ministry of Justice.

Chris Ruane: Have some compassion!

Philip Davies: Well, they have already had their kids taken off them, so why on earth is that a factor in whether they are sent to prison? They are deemed to be unfit mothers. We cannot have a get-out-of-jail card for people to say, "Oh, I'm a mother; I can commit any crime I like, but because I am a mother I shouldn't be sent to prison."

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Philip Davies: No. I was in Bradford Crown Court recently, where a woman was convicted of a serious offence. Between being charged and her appearance in court, she had deliberately got pregnant in the hope that that would stop her from getting a custodial sentence. *[Interruption.]* The judge, who pointed out to her that she had deliberately got pregnant in order to avoid a custodial sentence, was not taken in, thankfully. *[Interruption.]* I want the Minister to make sure that we have equality in sentencing.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Order. Whatever hon. Members' views, the hon. Gentleman has a right to be heard.

Philip Davies: I recently made a complaint about Judge Buckingham, who, when sentencing a woman, said that if Miss Parry was a man, he would have been "straight down the stairs", serving a custodial sentence. The judge decided not to send that woman to prison, even though she made it clear that if it was a man he would have gone to prison.

I will end with a check on the females in prison at the moment. This is a snapshot from the Ministry of Justice of 3,300 prisoners: 943 are in prison for violence against the person, including 338 homicides. Should those people not be in prison? There are 480 in prison for violence with injury; 21 are in for rape, the victims in all cases being other women; 87 are in prison for other sexual offences; 284 women are in for robbery; and 229 for burglary. Which of those should not be in prison? Who will say to their local communities that they want those people out of prison, free to commit crimes? It is an absolute disgrace.

Why can we not have the principle that whether someone is a man or a woman, the court will treat them exactly the same? That is what British justice should be about, and I hope the Minister will preside over that system.

3.11 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) for securing this debate and

[*Thangam Debbonaire*]

I add my tribute to hers. Mine go to the women's centre, Eden House, in the neighbouring constituency of Bristol East, and to the women who generously told me about their experiences. I will try to concentrate my remarks on my reactions to the written statement and will cut out the bits that hon. Friends have already mentioned.

The vision, established a year ago, stated that the Government wanted to see

"fewer women coming into the criminal justice system, fewer women in custody, especially on short-term sentences, and a greater proportion of women managed in the community successfully;" and

"better conditions for those in custody."

However, a recent response to my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston shows that the total number of women in custody has increased slightly over the past year. It also shows that the number of women coming into prison for the first time has decreased slightly. A report by the Prison Reform Trust last December showed that the number of women recalled to prison has more than doubled in the past year, and that has happened since the introduction of the Government measures supposedly designed to support people on release. The report reveals that more than 1,700 women were recalled to prison in England and Wales in the past year and that reforms are making things worse, trapping women in the justice system.

I will group bundles of questions together for the Minister; I am also happy to report to him in writing because I understand that he is covering for a colleague. First, what comments does the Minister have on the numbers? Why has the number of women increased in the past year, contrary to the aim of the strategy? What are the numbers of women coming into the criminal justice system as a whole? That is also important if we are to evaluate success. How is the Minister learning from the lessons of the very welcome decrease in numbers of women entering prison for the first time? How is he using that information to inform the ways of reducing the numbers of women coming into the criminal justice system in the first place?

We all want to prevent more crime. That also means we would prevent more women coming into the criminal justice system. What is the Minister doing to reduce the numbers of women returning to prison owing to lack of support? What progress can the Minister report on in providing them with better conditions while they are in prison?

The statement also mentions the new policy framework. I was glad to read that that was to include duties, rules and guidance and so on, particularly on issues such as caring for perinatal women in prison. I am pleased about that, but I want the Minister or a colleague to tell us how many babies have been born in custody since the policy framework was published and the extent to which their care followed the policy framework and guidance. What was the impact and what lessons can we learn? I apologise to the Minister, but I still have a lot of questions.

Another action is Lord Farmer's review for women, a welcome development commissioned by the strategy and published recently. It looked at how supporting female offenders in custody and the community to

engage with their families lowers recidivism. Whatever anyone says about why we might treat offenders in a particular way, if it lowers recidivism and crime, why would we not want to do it?

Our noble Friend in the other place, Jean Corston, already made those arguments 10 years ago. The Women in Prison report reiterated the case recently in "Corston + 10". The recently published research evidence briefing, "Why Women's Centres Work" by DMSS Research, also summarised the research evidence on the benefits of women's centres to female offending, which is surely something we all want to promote. Why did that review take so long, and why are we not able to see a clear timetable for when the Government will consider the recommendations and the findings? Perhaps it is because we are between Governments.

The statement goes on to say that there should be a women's residential centre pilot in at least five sites across England and Wales. It also mentions partnerships with other agencies, multi-agencies and whole-system approaches. But why only a pilot? Why all the scoping and consultation? The implementation of the Corston report and the evaluation of Corston projects has provided us with all the piloting we could possibly need, especially in a time of low funding. The cuts and the privatisation imposed by the Liberal Democrat-Tory coalition Government really undermined the sustainability of the Corston project in Bristol, Eden House, which was once a great example of a holistic service.

I know I need to close, Ms Ryan, because I have had my four minutes, but I want to urge the Minister and his successors, whoever they may be—perhaps the Minister will be among them—to work with the women's centres, because what we really want to see is the gender and trauma-informed work across the country, with a proper national network of women's centres. They do such great work. We want engagement with the members who have experience of such work so that we can do it as well as possible for all of our sakes, but particularly for the women and children.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I should say that I am sure everybody has noticed that four Members—from the Labour Benches, sadly—have made interventions in the debate and have now left the Chamber. That is not acceptable. I hope that the Whips in the room will take up the matter.

3.16 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate, Ms Ryan. In the short time that I have, I want to place on the record my support for the female offender strategy. It builds strongly on the work of the Corston report, which I had the honour of receiving as Minister in the then Labour Government in 2007-08.

We accepted 40 of the 43 recommendations. We appointed my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) as the champion to see the issue through, but then we ran into the blockage of democracy: the Government were removed from office in 2010. I fully support the efforts of the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) to bring together a strategy to

reduce the number of women in custody where possible. I take on board the comments of the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies)—that some crimes demand custody—but, where possible, we should reduce the number of women in custody, look at early interventions to support women in avoiding custody in the first place, and tackle some of the causes of offending with drug and alcohol services.

Only last week, I mentioned that the number of drug and alcohol treatment orders in the community has been halved in the past four years by the Government.

Ellie Reeves: Some 62% of women in prison are serving short sentences. My right hon. Friend talks about drug and alcohol programmes and early interventions. Does he agree with me that it would be better to invest in early intervention and community sentencing, and introduce a presumption against short sentences to make sure that women get the support that they need, rather than custodial sentences?

David Hanson: It is very important that we try to support women who have committed offences. Sometimes they have committed them because forces have driven them to it. We need to find an appropriate way to remove them from prison because prison has an impact on family life as well as on them. I welcome the efforts of the right hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke) on short prison sentences, and I hope the policy will continue with any new Minister in due course.

If I may focus on my own area of north Wales, there were 37 women on any given day last year in Styal Prison—40 miles from the border, and perhaps 100 miles from the north-west of Wales. I was asked last year by the Welsh Assembly Government to do an inquiry into the treatment of prisoners with regard to education and other services. It is important to note that in the female offender strategy, only four of the 179 paragraphs deal with Wales. It establishes a need for a blueprint. A female offender blueprint is being published by the Welsh Government, and it has very good aspirations. I would welcome an update on progress from the Minister, either in writing or when he responds at the end of the debate.

For example, in the work that I did last year in Wales, I found that there was limited access to Welsh language education for women whose first language was Welsh. There was limited understanding in the Welsh Government of how many female offenders would return to Wales, how many were linked into the labour market of Wales, and how many dependents people had. There was limited understanding of how much would be needed in the way of ongoing support requirements, to reintegrate women back from custody into the community in due course.

My hon. Friends have demanded a women's centre, and my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) will reiterate that. Wales is one country, but north and south Wales are two regions, where there are different demands on people. We need, as my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) said, to look at what provision there is for a women's centre in Wales. Those 37 women need to return to the community in due course.

I welcome the document overall, but I hope that the Minister can provide some clarity about a one-year update to the female offending blueprint, and a six-month update to the implementation plan being worked on by the Welsh Assembly Government in conjunction with his Department.

3.20 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) for setting the scene, and for her contribution. We live in a world where “equality” is a buzzword. We should strive for equal pay for equal labour, for the right person to get the job regardless of their gender and for all jobs to be open to any gender. However, being equal does not mean being the same. That is why we need a dedicated strategy for female offenders. That is what I want. The pressures and outcomes are vastly different and need specialised attention.

The issue is complex and I can see where difficulties arise in a family scenario. Whether we like it or not—we probably do—there is a need for compassion and understanding in the process. There is the option of a curfew. That causes difficulties if an offender's child gets sick and needs to go to hospital. Another issue is the burden of fines and the effect that they can have on the child. It is difficult to find alternatives to prison, but we must look for them. However, I firmly believe that if dependent children are a factor, we must strive to do what we can for the family unit while still ensuring that the duty to justice is met. We do not say it should not be met; we are saying it needs to be looked at differently. We must ensure that any punishment dished out to female offenders affects their children as little as possible.

Figures show that 54% of female offenders have children under the age of 18. Having their mother in prison can be a difficult experience for children. Those are complex issues, but some families have to face them; that is what the debate is about. However, we can and should explore alternatives to prison to ensure that children are affected as little as possible. I agree with Lord Farmer's report citing the importance of maintaining family ties for female offenders to ensure that they do not reoffend. He says that prisoners who receive family visits are 39% less likely to reoffend and that that is even more important for women than men. Women make up just under 5% of the prison population in England and Wales, yet they are more likely than men to reoffend. For that reason it is paramount that we focus, in the time they are in prison, on trying to prevent female offenders from reoffending.

There is a problem that needs attention. Serving short sentences could cause women to lose their jobs and could have other big effects on their lives. Reports indicate that in that situation inmates are more likely to be exposed to mental health issues and to self-harm. Those issues are specific to the female population. I do not say those things do not happen to men, but the numbers I am aware of through the stats and information we have indicate to me that we have to do something for them. If we want to stop them reoffending, we must ensure that prison does not seriously damage female offenders to the point where they do reoffend. Damaged people are more likely to break the law, owing to a sense of hopelessness. That is a fact.

[Jim Shannon]

It is, however, striking to read the stories of women finding prison an experience of being treated better inside than outside. According to the Prison Reform Trust, 57% of women prisoners have experienced domestic abuse. Prison can therefore be both a positive and a negative experience. It is important that the Government work to stamp out domestic abuse in the UK and help women escape from their abusive partners and find an alternative to resorting to prison to escape the abusive partnerships they are trapped in.

I concur with the Magistrates Association, which has highlighted the importance of making appropriate community sentences available for all. It has said that the justice system must be part of the process of early intervention, by supporting proper signposting or diversion where appropriate—not simply for women, but for all of those for whom it is suitable.

Time has beaten me, so I shall say only this. We have to do better at intervention, especially when statistics tell us that there is less chance of reoffending and more stability for children with the approach in question. I sincerely believe that the punishment must fit the crime regardless of gender, but there must be a red-line standard that is not crossed for female offenders.

3.24 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I thank you for your chairmanship, Ms Ryan, and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on securing the debate.

It is 12 years since Baroness Corston published her review, which looked at the vulnerabilities of women in the judicial system. In that review she highlighted the disproportionate and inappropriate sentences that women face for minor, non-violent offences and the chaos and disruption experienced by their families. She spoke about the many women who were, and still are, victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse, addiction and childhood neglect and who end up in prison because of a lack of support. In 2017, 10 years after the Corston review, 74% of Welsh women in prison were serving sentences of less than six months—double the number serving such short sentences when the report was published. With no female prison in Wales—and we do not want one—those women serve their sentences an average of 101 miles from their family. What help is that to a woman who is in turmoil, or to a child who desperately misses their mother? In April, the Welsh Labour Government scrapped outdated and disproportionate prison sentences for those getting into council tax debt, who more often than not are women. It was clear that sending those women to prison for perhaps 12 weeks because they could not afford to pay the money they owed was going to be of no benefit to anyone.

One of the key necessities is an increase in the number of women's centres as an alternative to prisons; it is essential. Earlier this month, I visited the Nelson Trust in Gloucester. It was like a breath of fresh air for me. Women offenders were being supported, educated and counselled in a suitable environment, enabling them to remain with their families and preparing them for a future away from the criminal justice system.

The Government have committed in the strategy to developing five more women's centres as a pilot across England and Wales. I ask them please not to forget Wales. Women's centres are central to the success of the female offender strategy. They make financial sense and will benefit society as a whole. Not only will female offenders be supported in a trauma-informed environment, but when they complete their sentence they will be in a position to move on with their lives with a positive outlook for their future. At the moment, too many women leave prison in dire straits after serving short sentences. They are often homeless, unemployable and desperate, which is why reconviction and recall rates are so high for female offenders.

The key to all that I am describing and to the strategy as a whole is, as with most things, funding. None of the recommendations or promises in the strategy can happen if the Ministry of Justice does not commit to them financially. We know that there will be money available from the sale of HM Prison Holloway. That should unquestionably be used to improve specialist services for women across the criminal justice system, such as the Treasures Foundation, founded by Mandy Ogunmokun to provide a safe female-only recovery environment to support women to overcome their issues and equip them with the tools needed to live a healthy and happy life. We need further settings like that, across the UK, to transform women's lives. We urgently need the Government to make a commitment showing that they are serious enough about the strategy to make the funds available. We have to get it right. We owe it to society and to the women we should be supporting.

3.28 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan, and to follow the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). I want to compliment the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on securing the debate and on all the work she has done in the area for many years.

The Scottish Prison Service is of course devolved. This afternoon I will say a little about the female offenders strategy in Scotland, but in response to the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), I want to talk about the good international evidence base for treating women offenders differently.

I am glad to say that Scotland has come a long way in its approach to female offenders in recent years. Until the mid-2000s, women found guilty of failure to pay fines for non-payment of television licences could face a custodial sentence to be served alongside women who had committed far more serious crimes. We do not do that in Scotland any longer. There are far more options for dealing with female offenders, and the procurator fiscal, the prosecutor, has the option of a fixed penalty.

More generally, in 2011 the former First Minister of Scotland, Alex Salmond, recognised that Scotland needed a new female offender strategy, and he commissioned my former boss, then Lord Advocate for Scotland, Elish Angiolini, to look into the position of women offenders and the prison estate in Scotland. Her commission reported in 2012, and recommended major changes to the way we deal with women offenders in Scotland.

There was only one exclusively female prison in Scotland. It is a big prison outside Stirling called Cornton Vale, which I visited in my previous profession. It was described by the commission as “not fit for purpose”, and I would agree with that. It was designed to house approximately 300 women, but there were often far more women than that, and they were not getting the services and support they needed. The commission also said that a significant number of women who were sent to prison on short sentences reoffended after release. It pointed out that women offenders tend to have complex issues and needs, with many having experienced domestic abuse, mental health problems, and drug and alcohol addictions, most of which were not getting treated during their incarceration. Importantly—this refers to what the hon. Member for Shipley said—the Scottish commission did not completely condemn the use of prison for female offenders, which it recognised is necessary for serious offenders, but it highlighted the need for prisons to try to rehabilitate female offenders. As a result of that commission, plans to build a new women’s prison in Scotland with the same capacity as Cornton Vale were ditched, and my friend and colleague, the former Cabinet Secretary for Justice, Michael Matheson, opted for a different approach in light of Elish Angiolini’s recommendations. He based that approach on the fact that short sentences do nothing to stop reoffending by women, and said that we needed to consider a more effective way of addressing the problem.

Instead of building a large new prison, he decided that the existing Cornton Vale would be knocked down, and that a small new prison with the capacity for 80 women should be built. Work on that has started already. In addition to that new prison, it was decided that five community custodial units should be built across Scotland, each able to house around 20 women offenders, and with a focus on addressing the underlying issues that they faced. The first two custodial units were commissioned in Glasgow and Dundee, and it is hoped they will be operational within the next two years. That will introduce a more personal and intensive approach that is more relevant to the needs of the individual. Interestingly, the BBC reported that women in Cornton Vale supported those plans, recognising that there is still a need for a custodial estate.

Let me deal with what the hon. Member for Shipley said by returning to Elish Angiolini’s report and the international evidence base that supports the view that there should be a distinct approach for women offenders. As Elish pointed out, such an approach is compliant with domestic and international law and obligations. Her commission identified three broad areas that support the case for a separate approach: the profile of women offenders, the predictors of reoffending by women, and what works to reduce reoffending among women.

For the profile of female offenders, the evidence base shows that, compared with men, women are more likely to pose a lower risk to public safety and to be in prison for dishonesty offences. They are more likely to be placed on remand and to have higher rates of mental health or drug problems. They are also more likely to have histories of physical and sexual abuse and victimisation, and to have dependent children. The commission did not say that such factors do not exist for male prisoners, just that, compared with men, women are more likely to experience them.

Dr Lee: Scotland is down the road on this. Can the hon. and learned Lady assure me that the Government in Scotland are auditing everything and building an evidence base for doing this? If one thing might move the dial south of the border, it is if the Ministry of Justice reads the evidence. I looked at this issue in Scotland when I was a Minister, and I was deeply impressed. Is it possible to guarantee that we collect the right evidence so that we can change things in England and Wales?

Joanna Cherry: I have no doubt that my colleagues in the Scottish Government are doing that, and I know that in his former role the Minister visited the prison service in Scotland. We have done some things well in Scotland. I do not say it is perfect or that we have got everything right, but it is internationally recognised that the presumption against short sentences in Scotland is changing patterns of reoffending.

I have dealt briefly with the profile of women offenders, but the predictors of reoffending for women are different. For example, research shows that certain factors are much stronger predictors of reoffending for women than for men, such as dysfunctional family relationships—especially family or marital conflict—and poor parent-child attachment, especially for young people. Poverty, deprivation and debt are also bigger reoffending predictors for women than they are for men.

The Angiolini commission found that to improve outcomes for women offenders it is crucial to understand what works to reduce reoffending. Although at the time, due to methodological constraints and the small numbers of subjects, there were few rigorous outcome evaluations of interventions in Scotland, international evidence showed that a number of factors were critical to reducing reoffending by women. One of those was effective intervention, including the thinking skills that need to be in place to challenge antisocial attitudes among women. Another was empathetic practitioners who develop good relationships with women offenders and provide practical and emotional support. The evidence base also supported holistic, rather than stand-alone interventions, and basic services to address women’s needs while in prison. That is just a taste of the international evidence base. It is not discrimination to treat women offenders differently; it is a recognition of the different factors that contribute to women ending up in prison, and that is my answer to what the hon. Member for Shipley had to say.

I look forward to the position in Scotland developing and improving. It is good to know that the Government for England and Wales and the Scottish Government are on a similar track and recognise the clear evidential basis for a different approach to dealing with women offenders.

3.37 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Ryan, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) for securing this important debate on the first anniversary of the Government’s female offender strategy. She and other members of the all-party group for women in the penal system do excellent work in this field. They are tireless campaigners for a better, fairer, justice system, and I pay tribute to them.

[*Imran Hussain*]

I suspect that my neighbour, the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), will disagree with a lot of my speech, but as the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) pointed out, numerous reports and studies recognise that female offenders face several additional complex challenges that are separate to those faced by men and that act as drivers of offending and reoffending. Those drivers are key to understanding how we can deliver a criminal justice system that is fair and just and that acts in the best interests of society.

As Members have said, both today and in the past, a woman in prison is more likely to have experienced domestic abuse or to be homeless before entering custody and after leaving. She is more likely to suffer from substance misuse and to experience mental health issues. She is also more likely to have committed a non-violent offence—most probably an offence due to poverty, where meeting a need rather than material gain was the objective—and to be serving a short sentence. The vast majority of those women are not dangerous. They are deeply troubled, and it is clear that, for many, prison is not the best place to address their needs and challenges or the drivers of offending. That is particularly clear considering the high level of reoffending by women released from prison compared with those serving sentences in the community.

Philip Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Imran Hussain: I have some stuff to put on the record, so on this occasion I will not.

The Corston report and others have stated that prison is rarely a necessary, appropriate or proportionate response to women who offend, and I completely agree. There is no reason why we should be locking up so many vulnerable women who have committed non-violent offences that are, in many cases, crimes of poverty.

Prison, regardless of the length of sentence, even if it is just a matter of weeks, takes away a woman's job, home and family—everything that has been proven time and time again to reduce the likelihood of reoffending. For those who have committed dangerous offences that leave them a danger to the public, of course, custody is still necessary, but for many, many women, that is simply not the case. Indeed, the Government themselves have recognised the complex challenges that women face and acknowledged the need for change, setting out in their much-delayed female offender strategy that criminalising vulnerable individuals has broader negative social impacts, that short custodial sentences do not deliver the best results for female offenders and that good community management works.

To address those issues, the Government set out three main objectives in the strategy: fewer women coming into the criminal justice system; fewer women in custody, especially on short-term sentences, and a greater proportion of women managed in the community successfully; and better conditions for those in custody. However, despite their warm words in the female offender strategy, we have seen little from the Government about turning vision into reality.

At the end of June, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), who is not here today, issued a written statement on the

progress that the Government had made. While he stated that he wishes to celebrate what he calls “improvements”, he should be doing anything but celebrating. What the Ministry of Justice has achieved is simply unacceptable for a year's worth of work. It just is not good enough.

The first problem that the strategy encounters is woeful underfunding, setting out just £5 million over two years in community provision for women, including an initial £3.5 million grant. Not only is that money already earmarked and allocated elsewhere as part of the violence against women and girls funding, but it is well short of what experts have said is needed.

The Government's own Advisory Board on Female Offenders told the Justice Secretary that the strategy requires at least £20 million, a view shared by the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), himself a former Minister, who has confirmed that the strategy is £15 million short. We often disagreed on things when he was my opposite number, but on this issue he had passion and vision, and I thank him for that.

Nor have we seen any progress on the development of the promised residential women's centres, despite their forming a core part of the female offender strategy. The hon. Member for Charnwood told the House in his written statement that the Ministry of Justice has

“recently concluded our first phase of consultation with local voluntary and statutory agencies”,

but added:

“We will continue to consult with partners as we refine...the pilot.”—[*Official Report*, 27 June 2019; Vol. 662, cols 54-55WS.]

That is far from good enough.

The Corston report of 2007 made the recommendation to deliver the first network of women's centres, and the Labour Government delivered it. We acted. We helped to develop and nurture that network, which has proven itself time and time again as a real, productive alternative to custody and has been met with praise by all those working with it.

Yet despite this body of evidence and the fact that their proposals are just a revision of the last Labour Government's policy, the Government still feel that there is a need for an extended trial. They do not need to conduct a trial. We know that women's centres work. Instead, they should either be getting on with their residential centres, or investing back into existing women's centres and those who operate them to expand the network. Over recent years, it has been devastated following a series of cuts imposed by the Government's reforms to probation, which led private probation providers to see their obligation to women as a requirement not to provide holistic support, but just to provide the option of a female supervisor.

Despite their stated desire to see fewer women in custody and on short-term sentences, the Government have also made little progress on reforming sentencing for female offenders. Women are still being sent to prison for non-violent offences where they are absolutely no danger to the public. They are still being sent to prison for poverty-related offences such as shoplifting or, quite disturbingly, for petty offences such as TV licence evasion—a point made earlier. The hon. Member for Shipley will want to know that women are sent to prison for that at a greater rate than men are.

Is that the society we want, where vulnerable women are sent to prison for petty offences such as TV licences? The Government are also still locking up vulnerable women whose needs and challenges cannot be addressed in prison. In particular, they are still locking up women who are homeless, and at a greater rate, with the number of homeless women sent to prison rising 71% from the 2015 figure.

In conclusion, last year we were promised a strategy that we were told would change the way women are treated in the criminal justice system, building on the highly influential Corston report. But a year on—a year in which the MOJ could have radically transformed the criminal justice landscape for female offenders—we have seen nothing of the sort. The Government should be ashamed of the lack of progress that they have made in the past 12 months. There is an overwhelming consensus among those who work with women and among hon. Members here today that we should be doing more to help female offenders. If this Government will not do it, a Labour Government will.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Minister, could you wind up your speech a few minutes before 4 pm, to allow the mover to wind up?

3.46 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland): Of course, Mrs Ryan. I am grateful for the reminder, because the mover of the debate, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and I served on the Justice Committee together for some years. I pay tribute to her for this debate and for her work.

I will just address the remarks by the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), for whom I have very high regard. I think he is a little unfair when he suggests that all the work that needs to be done under this strategy, or the progress that he envisages, could have been achieved in just one year. Those of us who have worked closely with the criminal justice system for many years know that the best and most sustainable reforms take time. We are dealing with a developing cohort of prisoners—men, women and children—who have differing needs and who need to be managed sensitively. It is not an easy task.

In saying that it is not easy, I am not shying away at all from the nature of the responsibility that I and the Ministry of Justice have to get this right. That is why, in the strategy, there was a refreshing frankness about the need to acknowledge the issue and to get not only the language but the approach right.

[Ms KAREN BUCK *in the Chair*]

Today's debate has been, in great measure, mature, sensible and evidence-based, and I welcome the contributions from all right hon. and hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) is right, by the way, in his figures when it comes to sentenced women offenders; about one third of them are in custody because of offences of violence against a person. He is correct about that. He is also right to remind us that justice must be equal, and that there will be plenty of occasions when, regardless of the gender of

the individual before a judge, that person will have to go to prison for serious offences. I think the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson), a former Prisons and Home Office Minister, acknowledged that.

We should not shy away from the reality facing judges and magistrates: there will be times when custody has to be the option, bearing in mind the seriousness of the offence. What I want to see from the criminal justice system—I speak at a time of change; we have an interregnum in my Department—is a system that is smart, not just in the use of resources, but in the administration of justice and our penal system, in a way that means that, when people have served their punishment and are released from custody, we end up with fewer victims of crime, not more. That is what reducing reoffending is all about.

There have been a lot of important pieces of information today; I agree with hon. Members who made the point that most custodial sentences for women are short. In 2018, 77% of custodial sentences for women were less than 12 months, compared with 62% for men. Over the same period, 55% of female offenders were sentenced to a custodial sentence length of up to and including three months, compared with only 35% of male offenders. To balance out the correct statistics that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley cited, last year just over one third of immediate custodial sentences for women were for shoplifting offences, compared with only 11% for men, and the average custodial sentence served was just under two months.

I went to Eastwood Park women's prison a few weeks ago, and the average sentence length there is about 10 weeks, which is not enough time to do much with a convicted prisoner or to do meaningful work, other than to provide as much support and help as possible for women who are often in a very difficult position. We must all understand the point about vulnerability and the evidence base about the female cohort in order to get this strategy right.

Female prisoners are more than twice as likely as male prisoners to report needing help for mental health problems. The figures are stark: it is 49% of women and 18% of men. About 60% of female offenders have experienced domestic abuse. Female prisoners are more likely to have been taken into care, experienced abuse or witnessed violence in the home as a child. Clear evidential facts rightly underpin our strategy.

The figures relating to custody for non-payment of television licences are, I am glad to say, low. Four women were admitted to custody for non-payment of television licences in 2018, and in the same year three women were admitted to custody for non-payment of council tax. It is important that I put that on the record for balance. Sadly, too many people in our country are living in very straitened circumstances, and plenty of people in those circumstances do not end up in the criminal justice system. We must be very careful when we talk about the cycle of poverty and what it means for offending. Having represented many women in very difficult circumstances as counsel, I know the challenges that many of them face. The lives that they have led are not lives that anybody here would choose to lead. I have seen it for myself. Eastwood Park was familiar to me because some of my clients served sentences there. That is why I was particularly interested in seeing its excellent mother and baby unit and talking to the women, some

[*Robert Buckland*]

of whom were in for longer periods. Their experiences and what they had to say were profoundly interesting. Some of the younger women I met were in for only a very short period, but even to my unclinical eye some were clearly vulnerable.

The strategy recognises those facts. It recognises the range of women's need. In setting out the three-pronged aims, it reinforces and embeds what Baroness Corston found in her groundbreaking report of 2007. The aims are that fewer women should come into the criminal justice system in the first place, that fewer women should serve short custodial sentences, and that we should create a positive environment that supports the rehabilitation of women who need to be in custody.

Hon. Members have spent much time rightly examining the work that has been done. Some criticism has been made of the £5 million multi-year funding. Of course, that is not the only part of our response to support women who are themselves victims or in a cycle of offending. I am sorry that an hon. Member who intervened in the debate but is no longer present found the system to be unduly bureaucratic. We must ensure that the way the funding is spent is based on sound evidence, and that it has a positive effect. That funding is being rolled out effectively, sustaining and enhancing 26 services to develop new women's centres and to pilot innovative specialist services across England and Wales.

I make no apology for piloting initiatives. We have to get this right. The Government were rightly criticised for jumping the gun when it came to transforming rehabilitation and making assumptions that sadly could not be sustained. The Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar)—who sadly could not be with us today because he is addressing the House on an urgent question—and I feel very strongly about that. This is also about the work that is being done more widely.

Chris Ruane: Many hon. Members mentioned the £80 million that was raised through the sale of Holloway. That huge sum of money could transform the number of women going into prisons across the United Kingdom. That would save the Government money in the end, too, so it would be a win-win situation. Will the Minister say something about that before he concludes?

Robert Buckland: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding me about that. As the Prisons Minister, I am responsible for a very large estate, and it would be difficult to hypothecate that money in the way that hon. Members desire. Having said that, some of the funds that were raised have provided a women's centre there, and the money is being ploughed back into the estate anyway. It is being used to make our prison estate safer, more decent and much better. It is difficult to hypothecate that money purely for these particular purposes.¹

Hon. Members asked many questions, and sadly I do not have all the time in the world to deal with them. I want to talk briefly about the important work of Lord Farmer's review and the vital issue of family ties. Women are more likely to be primary carers than men when entering the system. Of course, the innocent children of those relationships are the ones who suffer. We are very grateful to Lord Farmer for his review, and we will take his work forward. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley is right that the fact that someone might be a carer should not always be a reason for a court not to go down a particular sentencing path. Judges have to have discretion, and it would be bad sentencing practice for one issue to trump everything else.

I will try to deal with the questions asked by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston. I feel very strongly about pre-sentence reports, and I have asked questions of my civil servants. There is an improved new checklist to make sure that the probation officer is asking the right question about women offenders, and we will roll it out nationally. Part of my aim is to see PSRs used more widely throughout the criminal justice system. I will write to the hon. Lady on all her other questions, because I appreciate that she needs time to respond.

3.58 pm

Kate Green: I am grateful to all colleagues who have participated in this very good debate. There was widespread, if not entirely unanimous, recognition that the experiences of women offenders are different. Their motivation to offend, their vulnerabilities, and the impact of sentences on them and their families are different. The risk that women present is lower than that of men. Although I accept the figures that the Minister and the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) cited, I am happy, now that I have found my figures, to share the analysis carried out by the Prison Reform Trust, which led me to the 83% figure. I am afraid that I wrongly suggested that it was a figure from Crest Advisory. It was, in fact, analysis by the Prison Reform Trust. I will write to them, and indeed all Members who participated in the debate, to share that information.

The real lesson that we should take from this debate is that holistic, community-based provision is the most effective way to deal with the vast majority of women offenders, through dedicated, specialist provision. The one message that I want the Minister to take away from the debate is that we must have certain, sustained and adequate funding for a network of women's centres right across the country. I hope that if he continues as the Minister, he will pursue that agenda. I hope he remains in his role, but if he sadly does not I hope he will pass that message on to his successors.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the female offender strategy one year on.

1. [Official Report, 9 September 2019, Vol. 664, c. 6MC.]

Workplace Deaths: Scotland

4 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered workplace deaths in Scotland.

I know there are helicopters above us waiting for this speech, so I will just get started. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck, in this important debate. I thank the Scottish Trades Union Congress, Unite the union, Scottish Hazards and Families Against Corporate Killers for their time and assistance ahead of the debate.

There was a nearly 5% increase in workplace deaths in the UK last year, and a staggering 70% increase in Scotland. The Health and Safety Executive suggests that the increase was not “significant”, but as a trade unionist I firmly disagree. The death of any worker is significant for their family, friends and workmates, and the increase in workplace deaths across Scotland is significant for us in this House. It highlights that something is going wrong in sectors of the Scottish economy when it comes to the health and safety of workers. Working people look to us, their representatives, to raise and address their concerns. That is why I sought the debate.

According to the Health and Safety Executive, Scotland has the highest rate of workplace deaths per 100,000 workers in the UK. It also had the most recorded workplace deaths in the UK last year, at 29—higher than the annual average for Scotland of 19. I know the HSE will highlight that Scotland has fewer workers in low-risk industries than the other regions and nations of the UK, but surely that highlights why we must get workplace health and safety right in Scotland. Scotland has more workers in high-risk industries, who are more likely to be exposed to greater dangers in their workplace.

Both across the UK and in Scotland, the highest number of workplace deaths occur in the agriculture, construction and manufacturing sectors, but differences start to emerge between Scotland and the UK when we look at deaths by employment status. Across the UK, the self-employed are more than twice as likely as employees to suffer a fatal workplace injury, but in Scotland, the rate of fatal injury per 100,000 workers is higher among employees than among the self-employed. That greatly worries me, because it means that an increasing number of employees are being failed by their employers when it comes to health and safety in workplaces across Scotland.

The causes of those workplace deaths in Scotland also alarm me. Most of them were preventable if employers had properly enforced health and safety in the workplace. Workers should not operate machinery without appropriate protection, they should not fall from heights and they should not be struck by vehicles in the workplace. All those issues could be dealt with through proper enforcement and oversight of current health and safety regulations.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the increasing casualisation of the workforce—in particular the decline in trade union membership, which enforces appropriate standards in the workplace—is a contributory factor? I recall from my experience of working in a shipyard that the close relationship between management and trade unions was critical to ensuring a rapid and major reduction in lost work day incidents and accidents in the workplace.

Hugh Gaffney: Yes. I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. Trade unions have a vital role in health and safety in the workplace. We have health and safety reps, and any worker joining any place of work should join a trade union. Trade unions are not just there for pay; they are there for the protection of workers.

That brings me to enforcement and oversight. The TUC estimates that the HSE's budget has reduced by more than 40% since 2010. That means it has £100 million less in its budget this year, which undoubtedly impacts its ability to enforce and oversee health and safety in workplaces across the UK. Concerns have been raised by groups such as Families Against Corporate Killers that those cuts to the HSE have already hampered its ability to undertake health and safety inspections.

Ahead of today's debate I spoke to Scottish Hazards, which has researched staffing levels in the HSE. It estimates that the HSE lost more than 1,000 staff between 2010 and 2018. That means we have lost inspectors and other specialists capable of enforcing and overseeing health and safety in the workplace.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman share the concerns expressed by National Farmers Union Scotland that the number of deaths in the agriculture sector increased by five to 13 in 2018-19? That happened despite the best efforts of the Farm Safety Foundation, the Health and Safety Executive and the NFU itself. In the UK as a whole, agriculture, forestry and fishing have the worst fatality figures of the main industrial sectors. Does he agree that the UK and Scottish Governments need to assist—

Ms Karen Buck (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be short.

Hugh Gaffney: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who makes the point very clearly. A lot of migrant workers come over to work in the agriculture business. One death is too many, never mind five.

There has not been a single prosecution in Scotland under the UK Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007. It is clear that it is not fit for purpose. It has failed to make our workplaces safer, as highlighted by the increase in workplace deaths in Scotland last year. My colleague Claire Baker MSP presented a Bill in the Scottish Parliament that seeks to strengthen the law. It would create two kinds of statutory culpable homicide—where death is caused “recklessly” or by “gross negligence” on the part of an employer. That is the kind of change in the law we must seriously consider if we are to deter employers from action that may jeopardise the lives of their workers.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree with Unite the union and the Scottish Trades Union Congress that the failure to devolve health and safety law to the Scottish Parliament after the Smith commission was a missed opportunity?

Hugh Gaffney: Yes, I will always see it as a missed opportunity. I will always support the STUC, which I have known for 30 years and does a fantastic job. I urge the Minister to review the effectiveness of the existing

[Hugh Gaffney]

UK corporate homicide law and to reflect on whether there must be changes such as those proposed by Claire Baker in Scotland.

I heard one consistent theme in my discussions with organisations ahead of the debate. There is a feeling that HSE figures do not accurately reflect the number of deaths caused by work-related injuries and diseases. The Hazards campaign believes that the HSE's figures for work-related deaths do not include workers killed in road traffic incidents or deaths from work-related diseases such as cancer, or those who took their own life because of work-related pressures. It also highlights that the HSE fails to account for work-related ill health such as heart disease and mental health issues. That certainly raises questions about whether the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 2013 and other reporting tools are fit for purpose.

There are clearly issues with under-reporting if the labour force survey estimates that work-related injuries are at least 2.5 times higher than those reported through RIDDOR. The Hazards campaign has also raised concerns that recent changes to RIDDOR have led to a nearly 30% reduction in incidents being reported. There are clearly issues with RIDDOR failing to account fully for work-related deaths and ill health. I urge the Government to review the effectiveness of RIDDOR and other reporting tools currently used by the HSE so that we can ensure that the full scale of work-related deaths and ill health is being accurately reported.

A 70% rise in workplace deaths in Scotland is staggering. There is clearly an issue with health and safety enforcement in some sectors of the Scottish economy. I urge the Government to reflect on the issues I have raised today and to look again at the cuts made to the HSE since 2010. I call on them to review the law around corporate homicide to see whether it can be strengthened, and ask them to re-examine the effectiveness of RIDDOR and other reporting tools currently used by the HSE.

International Workers' Memorial Day is held on 28 April every year. I thank North Lanarkshire Trade Union Council for the work it does at the memorial at Summerlee Industrial Museum in Coatbridge in my constituency every year. The gates at Summerlee are marked with the motto of the North Lanarkshire Trade Union Council:

"The past we inherit, the future we build".

That makes us remember all those workers who have lost their lives and motivates us to campaign for better health and safety in our workplaces.

The loss of 29 lives last year in workplaces across Scotland should make all of us in this House reflect on the purpose of International Workers' Memorial Day, which has the slogan:

"To remember the dead and fight for the living."

4.11 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I thank the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) for securing the debate. He spoke with real passion on a subject on which he has campaigned tirelessly for a number of years.

On 3 July, the annual workplace fatality figures for 2018-19 were published. Sadly, they showed an increase in workplace deaths in Scotland—particularly in agriculture—which is a tragedy for everyone involved, including family members and friends left behind. My sympathies and thoughts are with them. As the release of the statistics each year shows, we must continue to strive to do better. I welcome many of the constructive suggestions that the hon. Gentleman made.

Great Britain consistently has one of the lowest rates of fatal injuries in Europe and is recognised as among the best performers for occupational safety and health worldwide. Our health and safety system combines goal-setting legislation and a risk-based approach to health and safety management, to enable businesses to assess and control the risks relevant to them. That allows health and safety controls to adapt as work processes and practices change, and it enables risk management to keep pace with technological change.

Businesses know that effective health and safety management allows for innovation, enhances productivity and enables growth. That, combined with Great Britain's long-established tripartite approach of businesses, workers and Government working together, has established our world-class health and safety record. However, we must not become complacent. We must continue to work with all involved to secure lasting improvements.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): The Minister talks about Britain's record on workplace safety. Given that, does he agree that when contracts go out to procurement, particularly in the green jobs sector, we must look at what we can do to support jobs staying locally, so that such jobs are good, local and unionised, and we can ensure that workers are protected?

Justin Tomlinson: It is absolutely clear that we must have that three-way approach through the Health and Safety Executive, workers and businesses to ensure that we are in the best place to maintain our proud record in this area.

In Scotland, there was an increase of 12 deaths compared with the previous year, mostly due to an increase in fatalities in the agricultural sector from three to 13. The figures for 2017-18 were particularly low, so care must be taken in drawing conclusions from those annual figures as numbers from one year to the next are subject to fluctuation. The increase is within the bounds of natural variation because of the low numbers involved.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Three of the five deaths that related to the use of all-terrain vehicles were in Scotland. Has the Minister had an opportunity to consider what might be done to better reinforce the message that people using such vehicles for farm business should be wearing helmets? What more can be done to get that message across?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend makes a typically constructive suggestion. As these terrible incidents happen, lessons are learned and shared and best practice is promoted. That is exactly the sort of lesson that we can push, and I know he will be a strong advocate on that.

Any death is unacceptable, so we must emphasise the importance of continuing to focus on working with businesses, workers, trade associations and others to prevent deaths by improving risk control. The primary

responsibility for managing risks to people's health and safety from work activities lies with the business or the person who creates the risk. HSE evidence shows that the key drivers of health and safety risk are industry sector, occupation and duty-holder attitude, rather than geographical location.

The regulator also plays an important part in improving standards. In cases of workplace deaths, investigation is a priority for the HSE. Through investigation, inspection and enforcement the HSE can: ensure individual businesses are managing risks properly; hold to account those who have failed in their statutory duties; and learn the lessons that play into industry to ensure that health and safety management continues to improve across the country. In practice, that means that during an investigation the regulator may take enforcement action to address conditions found on site. Following an investigation, there may be prosecution action in England and Wales, and in Scotland a recommendation to prosecute may be presented to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service.

Outcomes of investigations and prosecutions form the base of communications activity to highlight our expectations and have an educational and deterrent effect across businesses. Finally, lessons learned are discussed with industry stakeholders and, as necessary, fed into new or existing guidance to drive future improvement.

Analysis of incidents shows us that the main causes of fatal injuries to workers by industry sector are the same whether in Scotland, England or Wales. In agriculture, they include workplace transport, falls from a height and being killed by cattle. In construction, over half of all fatal injuries to workers over the last five years across Great Britain resulted from falls from a height. Factors contributing to fatal accidents across all industries include a lack of planning, training, maintenance and understanding of risk as well as poor risk management. The sad thing is that, as the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill mentioned, those causes are well known, as are the steps that can be taken to prevent them. There is much good guidance available from the HSE and industry that cover them.

In February 2016, the "Helping Great Britain Work Well" strategy, aimed at improving health and safety across Great Britain, was launched. I was pleased to write the foreword, which highlighted that we need to act together and help businesses to manage their risks well. The regulators cannot do it all, but the HSE will continue to work with businesses, workers and stakeholders to promote better working practices to protect workers.

Stephen Kerr: The Minister is being generous in giving way. In agricultural deaths, there has been a demographic shift towards people aged over 60. Is that true generally of reported workplace deaths? What does he believe might be a root cause of that startling statistic?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I will have to write to him to give more details. As I said earlier, we cannot stand still. Industry innovation, technology and workplace demographics are changing and we must always be on the front foot. The improvement of working practices has included the development of specific sector plans to drive improvements across agriculture, construction and other industries.

I turn to the key work taking place in Scotland to improve health and safety at work outcomes, particularly in agriculture. Industry-wide, the HSE chairs the Partnership on Health and Safety in Scotland, which brings together Scottish business and trade union representatives with the Scottish Government to work to improve businesses' management of health and safety. The HSE's agriculture sector plan recognises the challenges in changing attitudes and behaviours in the industry. A reduction in fatal injury rates is one of the three outcomes identified, through securing effective management of risk.

As part of Farm Safety Partnership Scotland, the HSE is working with the National Farmers Union Scotland, NFU Mutual and the Scottish Government to ensure that partners focus their activities on driving improvements in the management of risk. The HSE will continue to work with stakeholders to find opportunities to reduce fatal accidents in Scottish agriculture. I urge all parties involved in Farm Safety Partnership Scotland to really step up to the plate and deliver the further cultural change required to improve health and safety on Scottish farms.

Hugh Gaffney: The Minister talks about the Health and Safety Executive. Will he ask the new Prime Minister to put more money into it?

Justin Tomlinson: We are already world-leading, and the new Prime Minister will continue everything that is great about this country. I am sure that he will take particular interest in how we are recognised for our achievement in the area, and rightly so.

The HSE has commissioned research to gain a better understanding of farmers' attitudes to risk and risk-taking behaviour. From that research, a programme of interventions has been developed, including HSE-funded training known as agricultural compliance events. The training includes management of the risks of the most common causes of fatal injury on farms. The events are followed up by inspections to ensure compliance. To date, approximately 500 Scottish farmers have attended the events.

The HSE has also developed new guidance targeted at influencing those farmers who are unclear about how to manage risk and are most likely to have an incident at work. From that work, the key actions that the HSE is taking with the agriculture sector to improve standards are challenging the industry to take ownership of issues, developing shared solutions to known problems, and delivering consistent actions and messages.

In the construction sector, performance has improved over the past decade, and the number and rate of fatal incidents shows a long-term downward trend. An important vehicle for driving continuing construction improvements is Site Safe Scotland, a well-established tripartite partnership that works on improving health and safety on Scottish construction projects. Trade unions, major construction employers, training providers and the HSE support campaigns and initiatives across the country, such as the Scottish Working Well Together group.

The HSE wants to see a continuation of the downward trend in fatal accidents in construction, which will be tackled by embedding the principles of the Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2015; supporting small businesses to achieve improved risk management and control; reducing the likelihood of low-frequency,

[Justin Tomlinson]

high-impact catastrophic incidents such as fires or structural collapse by making early and strategic interventions in major projects; and developing clear standards of construction risk leadership and leading performance indicators.

The HSE works with Police Scotland, the Scottish Occupational Road Safety Alliance and others as part of a national campaign on the causes of fatalities in the transport sector, such as during loading and unloading, when workplace fatalities and injuries may occur as a result of poorly loaded and poorly secured goods.

I am pleased that we have been able to debate this important issue and highlight some of the common causes of workplace fatal injuries. The HSE will continue to engage with businesses and stakeholders in Scotland, as it will in England and Wales. It uses a range of regulatory actions, from influencing behaviours across whole industry sectors to making targeted interventions in particular sectors and activities. It will continue to hold to account those businesses that fail in their responsibilities to protect workers. While the increase this year in workers' deaths in agriculture is troubling, it is time not to change direction, but rather to continue to work together to reinforce the changes needed to safeguard workers' lives.

Once again, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill for securing the debate, and to other hon. Members for their excellent contributions. On any points that I have not been able to address during my speech, I will write with further details. I remind all colleagues that the HSE takes the issue incredibly seriously. Speaking in a personal capacity, having worked with the HSE for several years, I have been really impressed with how willing it is to engage with individual MPs. I have attended meetings of a number of all-party parliamentary groups that focus on particular areas of its work, where I have seen its technical knowledge and its willingness to challenge, adapt and work with all organisations, businesses, trade unions, stakeholders and Governments. In this area, we are world-leading.

The figures are disappointing, and I genuinely feel for all the families, but there is a real cross-party commitment to continue to do everything we can in this important area. I thank the hon. Gentleman again for his very constructive speech.

Question put and agreed to.

Access to Pension Credit

4.25 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered access to pension credit.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I am grateful that this important issue has been selected for debate before the parliamentary recess, and pleased to see so many hon. Members present from many political parties to discuss this crucial issue. Their presence, along with the large number of colleagues who have voiced real concern about the problem in recent weeks, clearly illustrates that it is by no means constituency-specific; it affects people in every constituency in the UK and in all parts of the communities that we represent. My argument is a simple one, but the solutions to the problem are far from straightforward.

Pension credit is failing. It is failing the ballooning number of pensioners who are living in poverty across our communities, and the Government's broken promise on free TV licences could be about to make things much, much worse. It is perhaps fitting that on the day the Prime Minister leaves office, we are here discussing just one of the numerous "burning injustices" that she failed to tackle—and that actually got worse on her watch. More of the same will not cut it. We must end this moral emergency.

The backdrop to our debate is simple but shocking. After nearly a decade of Tory austerity, almost 2 million pensioners are now living in poverty—a statistic that should not only shock us, but utterly shame us. In the now sixth-richest economy in the world, I am truly saddened and alarmed that the UK Government have allowed pensioner poverty to soar to such an extent. Indeed, I now believe that the situation is a moral emergency. To any Government Member who seeks to counter that claim, I simply ask: how can it be right that by this time tomorrow another 226 older people will have fallen into poverty? That is more than 80,000 pensioners per year—more than the number of people in most of our constituencies.

The frankly staggering rises that we are seeing will be difficult to reverse, but the Government's continuing paralysis over Brexit must not mean that the issue is allowed to slip further down the new Prime Minister's in-tray. If we do not address this moral emergency—if we allow this deeply damaging trend to continue—we have to ask ourselves what we got into politics for.

The issue does not affect just older people. The decisions that we take today to support older generations will have a real and marked impact on the future of young people across our country and on people of working age. If the Government continue to turn a blind eye to pensioner poverty, they will be sending one message, and one message only: "You can work hard all your life, pay into the system and try your best to get on and do well. But even if you do, there will still be a real risk that you will not be able to enjoy a dignified and comfortable retirement."

No responsible Government should allow the situation to continue. One thing we could do to address it over the summer recess is take real steps, rather than just speaking warm words, towards making people properly aware of their pension credit entitlement. The Government's appalling decision to break their 2017 manifesto commitment to

protect pensioner benefits has, rightly, caused hon. Members across the country to shine a light on the low uptake of pension credit across the UK.

Under the new BBC licence fee rules, as hon. Members will be aware, only households with someone over the age of 75 who is in receipt of pension credit will be eligible to continue having their licence fee waived.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): In Scotland, £300 million goes unclaimed in pension credits, including £7 million in my constituency. Surely that £7 million would help with those TV licence fees.

Chris Elmore: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. My point is that if all our constituents claimed the pension credit they are entitled to, it would cost more than providing free TV licences, so surely a good option would be to get better take-up of pension credit and to continue with free TV licences.

The new approach, when packaged in a Government press release, might at first look to some like a logical step to take, but when we unpack it and look at how many people are not accessing the financial support to which they are entitled, we see how utterly disgraceful the policy is and how much of a backward step it is. Put simply, the Government need to stop outsourcing their welfare policy to the BBC.

Of course, the Government provide a range of measures to protect the most hard-pressed pensioners, many of which are welcome and needed, yet their flagship policy to lift pensioners out of poverty—pension credit—is failing.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does he agree that the Government need to launch a major awareness-raising campaign about pension credit? There are more than 2,000 households in Blaenau Gwent that could be missing out on a total of £5.6 million every year. They have the right to this money, so let us make sure that they get it.

Chris Elmore: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I completely agree with him that the Government need to do a lot more to encourage pensioners to claim pension credit and make them understand that there is no stigma in their gaining pension credit. However, even in my constituency of Ogmere there is more than £5.1 million that is not being claimed by pensioners, so I completely agree with him, and I hope that the Minister will respond to some of these points at the end of the debate.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Further to that point, does my hon. Friend agree that it is quite concerning that the figure nationally for those entitled to pension credit but not claiming it is 40%? Meanwhile, in my own constituency of Barnsley East, more than 4,000 pensioners are due to lose their free TV licences. The combination of these two factors is really concerning. Does he agree?

Chris Elmore: I do agree with my hon. Friend. Her intervention re-emphasises the point that this issue affects pensioners right across the United Kingdom, and the

Government need to deal with it, starting by better advertising what is available and making sure that pensioners are able to access the money that they need and that is rightly theirs.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman share my shock and disbelief that pensioners tell me that when they phone up the helpline or claim-line for pension credit, they find that it is not properly staffed? Indeed, some of my constituents have been left on hold on the phone for up to an hour, even though there is no option to apply for pension credit using an application form. Barriers are being put in the way of pensioners claiming this money, which might explain the lack of take-up.

Chris Elmore: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention. As I will set out later in my speech, the parliamentary service here has been able to have some interaction with constituents from across the UK, and I have some examples that will almost confirm her view that the Department for Work and Pensions is being deliberately unhelpful when it comes to allowing pensioners to claim pension credit. I will refer to those examples later.

The Government's flagship policy to lift pensioners out of poverty—pension credit—is failing, and it has been for some time. Pension credit is not working for up to 1.3 million pensioner households that are eligible for this vital support, which could be the catalyst they need to lift them out of poverty, but they do not receive it. In my constituency, I find it completely staggering that there is £5.1 million of pension credit going unclaimed each year, and I know that there are many, many constituencies across the UK where the situation is even bleaker.

By the time the new TV licence rules come into force in 2020, pensioners across the UK will have endured 10 long years of Tory austerity—10 long years of austerity that none of them caused; 10 long years of austerity that many of these pensioners did not vote for. Indeed, 10 long years of austerity have had a devastating impact on the living standards and quality of life of hundreds of thousands of pensioners across the United Kingdom.

In 2003, pension credit was introduced under the new Labour Government. It was created to ensure that all older people received a minimum amount of income and has played a major role in previous reductions in poverty. Indeed, the last Labour Government lifted 2 million pensioners out of poverty as a result of policies such as pension credit.

What have we seen since? Over 400,000 more pensioners have been plunged into poverty, and two in five of the pensioner households that are entitled to pension credit currently do not claim it. That shows that it is not that the policy itself is not working; instead, it is that people who might need this money are not accessing it. The Government have to change that.

Parliament's brilliant digital engagement team asked people on social media and on the MoneySavingExpert.com forum over the weekend about their experiences with pension credit. It was clear from that research that although many respondents were aware of pension credit, there was much more confusion about what the benefit actually was, who is eligible to it and how it can

[Chris Elmore]

be accessed. Several of the respondents criticised the way that the DWP promotes pension credit to those who are eligible for it. For example, Joanne Stannard said that

“there are some over-75s who don’t even own a computer...make their lives easier”.

Susan Brady said:

“I worked for the DWP for over 30 years in operational delivery, so I am well aware how unfair our welfare system is. We seem to despise our older people in the UK. It’s wrong, totally wrong.”

I could go on, but what was clear from the responses is that the system is not fit for purpose. People do not know whether they are eligible for pension credit and many are struggling to get by, despite working hard throughout their lives.

I thank everyone who responded to the questions posted online or shared their views about them, and I pay tribute to the digital engagement team for again helping us to have as informed a debate as possible.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a great speech, with lots of very salient points. Recently, when it was announced that over-75s would get their TV licence free only if they are on pension credit, I wrote to all the over-75s in my constituency, so I will just add a response that I received to those that he has cited. One constituent said that he not only received his pension credit but now also gets

“council tax credit, help with...glasses and dental, and a premium on...carer’s allowance.”

He was forced into poverty because of a lack of information that only I, as his representative, could correct. Is that not something that the Government should do?

Chris Elmore: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The point that I will make later in my speech is that there seems to be this assumption that increasing publicity does not necessarily work or that trying to get cross-benefits, for example around housing benefit, would not solve the problem. However, his intervention shows that where Members of Parliament are proactive—arguably, the Government could be proactive instead—they can gain more support for their constituents. I pay tribute to him for doing that already; perhaps the Government could follow his lead.

Over the last few weeks, I have been working closely with the older people’s charity Independent Age, which has put forward some sensible recommendations that could help us to improve this situation. Indeed, its “Credit Where It’s Due” campaign has already made waves across the country, and I am proud to support it in its entirety.

Working with sector stakeholders and with all levels of Government, it is essential that the Government act to ensure that everyone who is entitled to pension credit receives it. To achieve this, I impress upon the Minister the need for him to make three clear commitments today. The first is to ensure that at least 75% of eligible people receive pension credit by the end of 2020. The second is to ensure that that figure is at least 95% by the end of 2022. The third is to ensure that it is 100% by 2025.

Independent Age estimates that if measures are put in place to achieve a 75% take-up target by 2020, half a million pensioners could be lifted out of poverty by putting an additional £1.25 billion into the pockets of our poorest pensioners. To reach those targets, the Government must put in place a comprehensive action plan that is ambitious about the full range of improvements that can be—indeed, need to be—made. Simply continuing previous approaches, such as focusing merely on new awareness-raising campaigns, will not allow us to make the progress on this issue that is desperately needed.

Of course, the voluntary sector plays a vital role in supporting older people to access pension credit, but such support cannot be relied upon to improve uptake across the country if used in isolation.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech with some excellent points. In Cardiff North, nearly 1,400 older people are missing out on a combined total of £4 million of pension credits. That has a huge impact on my constituency. I am reaching out to those older people. He has secured this important debate to reach out to the Government to do more, and his points are very salient. Does he agree that the Government need to be far more proactive in this area?

Chris Elmore: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. She makes a strong case as to why the Government should do more, because, as I have already said, this issue is clearly affecting every constituency right across the UK.

Previous Government attempts to work with older people’s groups and charities to raise awareness of pension credit have made a positive difference in the short term, but they have not been enough to achieve the longer-term change that we need. For the record, I have no problem at all with the Government engaging with and working with the voluntary sector to support pensioners. There are many reasons why voluntary groups do extraordinary work in supporting pensioners’ groups and older people’s groups to tackle loneliness or offer support. I take nothing away from any of that work, but the Government need to take responsibility for the fact that there are millions of pensioners who are not receiving the pension credit that they should rightly receive.

The four stages of Independent Age’s action plan are a clear and decisive way to turn this around. First, the Government must take responsibility for getting pension credit to older people. Previous research has generally focused on the failure of older people to respond in the way that the system demands. Barriers to claiming pension credit can include confusion about the application process and the stigma associated with claiming benefits. Many people do not apply because they think they are ineligible. At times, there has been more ambitious thinking. In 2012, the Department for Work and Pensions ran a small trial in which pension credit was paid to people without them having to apply. However, that approach has not been fully explored or rolled out. The Government need to use the information and techniques they have at their fingertips to significantly simplify, or even remove altogether, the application process for pension credit.

Secondly, the Government should consider the trigger points affecting pensioners on low incomes and explore cross-referral across agencies. They should look beyond

retirement age and explore the role of other services at those trigger points, such as the role of GPs, or ensuring that applicants for disability or carer benefits are notified about pension credit at the point of award. The DWP should explore its role in notifying such individuals about pension credit; for example, Tell Us Once is a service that lets a person report a death to most Government organisations in one go. That could be a route to notifying the bereaved about the support they may be entitled to.

Thirdly, the Government must explore the role of housing benefit. Some 80% of households take up housing benefit, compared with as few as 58% for pension credit. We know that over half of the 330,000 pensioners who have moved into poverty since 2013 are renting. Some of those people will be entitled to, but missing out on, pension credit. Currently, the Department for Work and Pensions passes on the information received for a pension credit assessment to the relevant local authority, so that the applicant is able to claim housing benefit. However, the reverse does not happen. There is therefore an opportunity to ensure that when housing benefit has been awarded, the information used in that assessment is passported from the local authority to the DWP for a pension credit assessment.

Lastly, the Government should explore options for using behavioural insight. The Government should ensure that every element of the action plan is developed in partnership with older people. For example, they should explore co-producing communications with older people to maximise the likelihood of getting a response. This is about focusing less on assumptions and more on actually understanding the needs of older people.

I will briefly highlight some of the fantastic work being done to support pensioners in my constituency of Ogmore, including by the various older people's groups that I meet with on a regular basis in Cefn Cribwr, Llanharan, Brynna and Maesteg, as well as the men's sheds in Tondy, Ogmore Vale and the Garw Valley. Those organisations do an extraordinary amount of excellent peer-to-peer work to support older people by trying to tackle issues such as loneliness and secure the support that pensioners are entitled to. Nothing makes me prouder to be the MP for Ogmore than seeing different parts of those communities coming together to support one another. However, it is now time for the Government to step up and support the valiant efforts of those organisations by delivering the changes we need to stop any more pensioners falling into the dangerous cycle of poverty.

We stand at yet another turning point in our politics. Tomorrow we will likely have a radically different Government from the one that is before us today. While he has only been in office a matter of hours, the new Prime Minister's in-tray must have more issues in it than the number of positions he has had on Europe over the years. However, this issue must not be parked until after we do or do not Brexit. The Government have to start realising that constitutional issues must not trump the real-life impact that their failures are having every day on our communities up and down the UK. Therefore, in all sincerity, I ask the Minister to not come back to us with warm words, but to give pensioners a real action plan that will deliver the poverty reduction that we need.

If austerity really is set to come to an end, it is time that this Government give back to the communities that have felt the brunt of the pain their policies have caused over the past 10 years. The first big but important step towards doing that is to ensure that older people receive the money that they are legally entitled to. Surely that is not too much to ask.

4.44 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) on securing this afternoon's debate, and thank him for the case that he has outlined.

As we have heard, pension credit is not working. Over £200 million of pension credit is not reaching older people in Wales each year, including almost £6 million that is not reaching people in my constituency. As many as 80,000 people in Wales, and over 1 million in total across the UK, are currently missing out. The financial support that pension credit provides would be a life-changing event to a great number of those people, who are finding it harder and harder to get by due to years of Tory austerity. That is certainly the case in constituencies such as mine in the south Wales valleys, where it can often be easy for geographic isolation to cause older people to suffer from loneliness and poor mental health. Pension credit can enable people suffering from loneliness or isolation to take part in a range of social activities they would not otherwise be able to, not to mention make shopping and other bills affordable.

I also want to mention free TV licences for the over-75s. Following the Government's cruel decision to offload responsibility for that concession to the BBC, there is a policy to means-test pensioners' eligibility for free TV licences through pension credit. That is not a suitable test, since the current take-up of that benefit is so low. Not only will about 3,220 pensioner households in my constituency and many thousands more across the UK continue to miss out on that essential benefit, but they will now be hit by a bill of over £150 for a TV licence.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore said, almost 2 million older people in the UK are living in poverty. It is shocking that more than two in five pensioner households are not receiving the pension credit to which they are entitled, an average of £49 per week. That money would make a huge difference to some of the poorest people in my constituency, across Wales and across the UK. Those pensioners have paid into the system their entire working life, but that very system is now letting them down.

The Government must now act to improve the take-up of pension credit and launch a campaign to create wider awareness of it, in order to lift pensioners out of poverty and give them the quality of life that they deserve. I plead with the Minister to consider the real and grave concerns that have been raised during today's debate, and come forward with answers, not words, to address an injustice that is causing hardship to those who can least afford it.

4.47 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I will speak briefly, because I know a lot of Members want to speak. I thank the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) for having secured this important debate.

[*Patricia Gibson*]

It is a disgrace that pension credit—the support in place to help our poorest pensioners—has been under-claimed by £7 billion since June 2017 across the UK. In my constituency, that figure stands at £7.4 million. While many pensioners often have to choose between eating and heating, they are unaware that other support has been set aside for them. I have raised this issue on the Floor of the House, and asked what the Government were going to do to publicise that support and ensure that our poorest older people were aware of it. Predictably and disappointingly, the answer I received was rather dismissive.

It seems to me that unacceptable obstacles have been placed in the path of those who might claim and benefit from this support. In my constituency, as I said earlier, I have been told by old people that when they call the pension credit claim line, it is not properly staffed. After being kept on hold, sometimes for up to a full hour, the would-be claimant gives up and hangs up. On hearing that, I advised my constituents to apply for pension credit via post, but guess what? Only those living in Northern Ireland can do so. I wonder why that is; perhaps the Minister can explain why there is more concern for constituents in Northern Ireland than for those in North Ayrshire and Arran.

Why does this matter? It seems to me that by not informing older people that pension credit exists, and then making it as hard as possible for them to claim, the less it costs and the more can be clawed back by the Treasury. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of pensioners in my constituency and across the UK are robbed of vital support that could make a material difference to their circumstances. That is before we talk about those who may miss out on pension credit and, as a further blow, will lose their right to a free TV licence when those are cut by the Government, not to mention the fact that pension credit is often a gateway benefit to other support.

The cuts in pension credit for mixed-age couples were sneaked out under the cover of the Brexit chaos. Add to that the betrayal of women born in the 1950s, who have been robbed of their state pension, and we have a UK Government breaking their manifesto pledge to protect pensioner benefits.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The hon. Lady is not the first representative from her party to complain on behalf of the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign. However, there is devolution in Scotland. If she really cared about the issue, should the Scottish National party Government not put their money where their mouth is?

Patricia Gibson: The WASPI women are not stupid, and they have heard that myth peddled repeatedly. There is a particular section in the Scotland Act 2016, which I recommend the hon. Gentleman reads, that forbids the Scottish Government from providing benefits “by reason of old age.”

If he were to read the Act, he might learn a thing or two before peddling that myth. I also remind him that the Scottish Parliament does not exist to clear up a Tory mess.

It is clear that the Government are no friend, supporter or protector of our older people. It is time for the Government to get a grip, stop punishing our older people, stop punishing people for being poor, get on with the day job and properly address pensioner poverty.

4.50 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak briefly in this debate under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), and congratulate him and his new wife on their wedding last weekend. I wish them many happy years together; hopefully they can draw their pensions together in years to come. I will say a word about the level of pension credit take-up in Wales, and I commend my hon. Friend for raising the issue. I know that a couple of other things are happening in this city today, but although minds will be focused on the new resident in Downing Street, I hope the debate gets the focus and attention that it deserves.

As all colleagues will know, and as my hon. Friend indicated, pension credit is the main means-tested benefit for pensioners. For those people reaching state pension age before April 2016, pension credit has two parts—guarantee credit and savings credit. Guarantee credit provides financial help for people aged over the qualifying age for pension credit whose income is below a set amount. Savings credit is an extra amount for people aged 65 or over, who have made some provision for their retirement.

As we have heard, in 2016-17 up to 1.3 million families who were entitled to receive pension credit did not claim the benefit. That equates to about £3.5 billion of available pension credit going unclaimed. On average, that amounted to about £2,500 per year for each family, and in Wales in 2016-17 more than £170 million went unclaimed by some of the poorest older people in our part of the United Kingdom.

I have been an MP for only a few months, but before my election to this House I worked in the NHS for more than 30 years. It was clear to me then, as it is clear to me now in my new role as the Member for Newport West, that food poverty and fuel poverty are on the rise, and that there is a homelessness crisis. In this House, and in all four parts of the UK, we need to do more to assist those eligible to apply and we need to ensure that people know that they are eligible.

There is a communication issue here. We need to do more, go further and be clearer about the fact that pension credit is there to help those who need it. The Government's welfare policies leave a lot to be desired. Frankly, the Government should be ashamed of much of the last nine years. However, for all that shame there is support and we should encourage our constituents to seek it. I will use my role as the Member for Newport West to champion the issue, and will continue to work with and support my hon. Friend to raise these issues.

I do not know whether the Minister has been notified, but I would like him to address two questions. First, the take-up of pension credit by couples continues to be lower than that of single people. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that the rate at which couples claim pension credit increases? Secondly, according to the Older People's Commissioner for Wales, £170 million of pension credit went unclaimed in 2016-17. What steps are the Government, alongside other Departments, taking to increase pension credit take-up rates in Wales?

4.54 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) on an excellent introduction, in a comprehensive speech about a great injustice.

Recently, I visited the Alive and Kicking project in my constituency, which was a great organisation to discover. It was set up in the year I was born, so it is 30 years old. It has been an amazing charity—a stalwart in the Springburn area in helping to involve older people in the community in social activity when otherwise they might be isolated on the fringes of our communities.

Such organisations, the length and breadth of Britain, are the backbone of ensuring that social isolation and alienation are not a more common occurrence. We often underestimate the capacity of those organisations. Yet, sadly, they face significant financial pressures due to local government cuts. It is an onslaught on every front that many such organisations—the infrastructure that supports older people—face.

The people at the Alive and Kicking project were very hospitable. They gave me my lunch and we had a game of bingo. I had a great time with them, but we also had a Q and A session. There was so much anger from the older people about the TV licence being taken away. I could not believe the anguish that it was causing a lot of people—the feeling that they had done so much for their country over the years, working all the hours that God sends, as one lady said, to be greeted with that. She was recently widowed and the television is a critical part of her social existence. When she is not at the social club she is just alone at home and she communicates with the world through that television.

That is an insight into the hardship that the change is causing. It is not good enough to pass the buck to the BBC. We know the true reason why it has made the cutback; there is no point in trying to sugar-coat it. In my constituency, 1,400 people who currently qualify for the TV licence will be denied that opportunity. That adds extra impetus to the issue of pension credit under-claiming. We have to focus on the barriers to access, which have been referred to.

Many people spoke to me at the club about issues that they have had in accessing the benefits, their lack of awareness and even organisations' lack of knowledge of how to assist users and maximise benefit claims. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps the Minister is confirming the details of how people claim those benefits. It is clear to me that the interface for normal people dealing with it has been deliberately designed to deny access.

We know for a fact, as a result of freedom of information action, that deflection scripts are practised for universal credit. There is an insidious ethos within the Department for Work and Pensions to deflect and deny access to rightful entitlements. That is utterly shameful and is a fact—an example was alluded to earlier. In my constituency, just 56% of those who are eligible to claim pension credit do so, according to the recent Independent Age study. That means that about 4,610 people claim it but 3,648 do not, leading to a cumulative total of £11 million a year that is unclaimed in my constituency.

That is not good enough, I am afraid, in a constituency that faces some of the worst social challenges in not just Scotland but the United Kingdom. It is a mark of shame on the DWP that the figure is as high as it is.

There is a clear correlation between levels of social deprivation and the under-claiming of benefits that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. We currently have a regressive system, because the onus is on the individuals with the least capacity to claim the benefits. That must be fixed. The dice are loaded against them and it is not good enough.

That was just a simple insight into one example of when I went around my constituency and discovered the hardship that this issue is causing. I think that the people at the Alive and Kicking club would appreciate it were the Minister to commit to sending a DWP representative to visit the club, speak to the service users there and talk to them about how they can maximise their rightful entitlement. I think that that would be received very well. I look forward to the Minister committing to give at least that measure of reassurance to my constituents. The figures as they stand are shameful, and I hope that the Government will address them with due urgency.

4.58 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) on an excellent speech. It is noticeable that the Celtic nations have dominated the debate so far, with one honourable exception in the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock). I have noticed something else in the debate, and we should show sympathy and solidarity with our Conservative colleagues, who are all nervously watching their telephones as the reshuffle begins. If social media is to be believed, we are looking at an episode of “Game of Thrones”—“The Red Wedding 2”—but we will see what happens in the next few hours.

As I said, the hon. Member for Ogmore made an excellent speech on access to pension credit and pressed home the statistics that he read out. The Independent Age charity informed me that there is an unclaimed £9,664,000 in the Glasgow South West constituency on a yearly basis. Frankly, that is an astonishing figure. It is outrageous that the Department for Work and Pensions is allowing billions in benefits to go unclaimed by poor pensioners. As the hon. Member for Ogmore said, four in 10 pensioner households that are entitled to pension credit are not receiving it. When we add that to the TV licence proposals, which I will come to, it looks very much like poorer pensioners are missing out on many aspects of state support that they should receive.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) and others have rightly invited DWP to try to sort out the situation, but some of us feel that, as Members of Parliament, we have to address it as well. I am organising a pension credit event for pensioner clubs and other organisations—bowling clubs, for example—during the summer recess, to show their members what they are entitled to and highlight that they will have friends and neighbours who are entitled to pension credit but are not receiving it.

We have other decisions on pension credit. The outrageous decision to cut pension credit for mixed-age couples could cost some couples £7,000 a year. It really is not good enough for the Government to say that a decision was made in 2012. There have been two general elections since then, and the make-up of Parliament is a

[Chris Stephens]

lot different. There really should have been parliamentary scrutiny before 15 May, when the Government decided to put that forward. It is unacceptable, and just another addition to the long list of policies that are hurting older people.

I want to touch briefly on TV licences, because I think a number of hon. Members have suggested, and I agree, that it could end up being a false economy for the Government—[Interruption.]—I am obviously getting agreement from outside, as I am being cheered. It is a false economy because what could end up happening is that we will have people claiming pension credit to try to keep their free TV licence, which will cost the DWP a lot more than if it had kept TV licences under its domain. There is also the issue of the 1950s-born women, many of whom were not properly informed of the changes. Some have been affected by the mixed-age couple rules, and some single 1950s-born women could be eligible for pension credit, but they will have to wait longer to claim it because of the increase in pension age.

I want to close by emphasising that any suggestion that austerity is over is absolutely farcical. The Government have continued to target austerity at the most disadvantaged. The changes they are making to pension credit, and the fact that they are not proactive in ensuring that poorer pensioners know they are entitled to it, emphasises the point very well indeed.

5.3 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. The people who built Britain are entitled to expect but the best in retirement. As my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) put it, they paid in throughout their lives in the expectation that they would be supported in the twilight of their years. The sense of grievance was brilliantly brought to life by the outstanding speech given by my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore). I pay tribute to him for securing this debate and for everything that he is doing.

Let us look at the history of pensioner poverty. In 1994-95, 28% of pensioners lived in poverty. That fell to 13% in 2011-12 as a consequence of action taken by a Labour Government: a fall achieved by offering extra help for poorer pensioners. However, that progress has been slammed into reverse, partly because of the chaos over pension credit, but also because of the changes to welfare policy. Pensioner poverty is now rising—back to 16% in 2017—suggesting that the previous progress has indeed been slammed into reverse. The sense of grievance about that was encapsulated by the excellent contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones).

Some 14 million people now live in poverty in the UK—over one in five of the population—and they include 1.9 million pensioners. Reference was made to the excellent work done by Independent Age. I pay tribute to that remarkable organisation, which found that a more than a million pensioner households across Great Britain are forced to live in poverty owing to the Government's failure to act on pension credit—these

are the pensioner households missing out, or PHoMOs. Since the last general election, that has meant that the Government have held on to a staggering £7 billion—£3.5 billion each year—in unclaimed pension credit that should have gone to pensioners, a figure that will increase to a staggering £17 billion by 2022, equating to £10 million every day.

That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) was absolutely right to point to the sense of anger at the situation. His is an organisation called Alive and Kicking and mine is called Elders with Attitude, but the message is the same. In fact, I have their T-shirt.

Getting pension credit is all the more important now because of what is happening with TV licences, about which I will say more later on. Forgive me if I stress once again that, as an initiative, pension credit was a landmark achievement of the last Labour Government. They cut pensioner poverty consistently, and at the heart of that achievement was the strategy relating to pension credit, but it has been slammed into reverse.

As hon. Members will know, the origin of pension credit was as an income-related benefit specifically designed to lift pensioners out of poverty. Introduced in 2003, it was created to ensure that all older people receive a minimum amount of income and has played a major role over the years in the reduction of pensioner poverty, until now. It is all the more important that pension credit is paid and that the people who deserve it get it.

On the one hand, there is a stereotype that all older people own their own homes, but, sadly, this is against a background of decreasing home ownership and rising rents in the private sector. Independent Age's research shows that more than half a million older people in England now live in private rented accommodation, and that more than half of the 330,000 pensioners who have moved into poverty since 2013 are either private or social renters. Pension credit is all the more important for them.

On the other hand, pension credit is essential—for example, to pay for transport costs. Particularly in rural areas and for people with health or mobility issues, a car or taxi can be the only way to reach necessary services. Pension credit can also mean that older people are able to take part in social activities, reducing the risk of loneliness.

Pension credit is important for all those reasons and an additional one, which my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) mentioned: it is a gateway to accessing other benefits. People missing out on pension credit could also be losing out on up to £7,000 a year in additional help. Pension credit can act as a gateway to housing benefit up to £5,020, to council tax support up to £1,670, to the warm home discount at £140, and to NHS costs, including dental treatment or eye care, up to £296. So it is all the more important that people who are entitled to pension credit get it.

To add insult to injury, it was announced earlier this month that free TV licences for the over-75s will now be means-tested. Several hon. Members have referred to that, and rightly so. The Library's research shows that more than 3 million people will be affected by that move. It is estimated that 1.3 million poorer over-75s are eligible for pension credit but do not claim it. They will lose their free TV licences due to the proposal to tie licences to pension credit.

It is also estimated that 1.6 million pensioners living alone will lose their free TV licences in a means-tested system. That is absolutely wrong. In my experience, television can indeed be a friend to a lonely pensioner. The Tories' idea to increase take-up of pension credit is, as is often mentioned, an "online toolkit", but the problem is that its track record of achievement is lamentable. Pension credit is an online toolkit, but that has shown drastically declining usage since 2014. More than half of over-75s in the UK say that they have not used the internet in the past three months, and the amount of people accessing the toolkit fell by 84% between 2014 and 2018, with only 2,078 people using it last year. The fact that more than 1 million households in the UK are not claiming the pension credit to which they are entitled shows that the Government's efforts simply are not working. It was therefore right that my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmores secured this debate to focus on that.

I will refer to one other outrage, to be frank: the changes to pension credit slipped through on the same night as the first Brexit meaningful vote: from 15 May, new pensioners whose partners are younger than the state retirement age of 65 may no longer claim a means-tested top-up called pension credit. Instead, they will be forced to claim the much less generous universal credit alongside their younger partner. The couple rate of universal credit is £114.81 a week, compared with £255.25 a week for a couple on pension credit. That amounts to a potential loss of £7,320 a year—an absolute outrage.

The crucial question is what the Government will now do about that. I strongly support my hon. Friend's recommendations on targets and his call to hear the Government's action plan to right an undoubted wrong. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) said, the aims set out by Independent Age are eminently achievable over a five-year period, with targets being incrementally increased to get us to a position where 100% of those entitled to pension credit actually get it.

I will close with the point that I started with. We have a sacred duty to those who built this country. They endured so much not only in the world of work, but in conflict defending this country. The scale of the problems they had to overcome throughout their lives is sometimes unimaginable. They paid in throughout their lives. In retirement, they expected to be looked after for the rest of their years. It is absolutely wrong that pension credit is not working and, as a consequence, hundreds of thousands if not millions of pensioners are not getting that to which they are entitled. I say to the Government in all earnestness: Ministers should be ashamed of that.

5.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Ogmores (Chris Elmore) on securing this important debate, which I accept addresses significant and real issues. I must also congratulate him on his marriage. He will agree with the Prime Minister—bear with me—when she made the point at Prime Minister's Question Time today that those who choose to marry a Member of Parliament do so with great bravery. It is an honour and privilege to

get married, but choosing to marry a Member of Parliament is a bold thing. I wish Mrs Elmore well, and I wish them both well for the future.

It is also a great privilege and pleasure to welcome the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) to this place. This was the first time I have heard her speak; she spoke most eloquently. I congratulate her on her win, and wish her good fortune and enjoyment of this great privilege to hold a position in this House, where she will hold Government to account and possibly, in about 30 years, have a Labour Government—obviously under a new leader, as everyone in the House of Commons seemed to agree today.

Before I get into the nuts and bolts of the debate, I will make a point that is fair across the board and yet matters. It is entirely right for the hon. Member for Ogmores and the Opposition parties generally to hold Government to account, but it is also right that we all celebrate, support and talk glowingly about the various voluntary and charitable organisations that do such great work in all our communities.

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to the Minister for making that point. Does he agree that organisations such as the Gloucestershire Older Persons' Association, which helps with everything from digital technology to benefits and so on, are precisely the ones that Government ought to be supporting to ensure that those who are entitled to pension credit or any other benefit get them? Supporting those charities is something that, respectfully, the Government could do.

Guy Opperman: I will not necessarily make fresh policy on Government support for charities—

Chris Elmore: Go on!

Guy Opperman: Much though I am urged to do so by the hon. Gentleman. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) asked if my phone was turned on, but it is most definitely turned off—with respect and due deference to the Chair—and it is not for me to make new tax or incentives policy.

A perfectly legitimate point, however, can be made in two ways in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and several other speakers. Voluntary organisations do a fantastic job of explaining to our older community—some of whom are digitally challenged and some fully up to speed online—the opportunities to claim and the things out there that the Government will provide, and that applies to any Government down the years. Basically, those organisations should have all our support, and anything that individual Members of Parliament, local authorities and local organisations can do to assist their efforts is entirely right. In my constituency, I have visited the Men's Shed in Hexham and various support organisations, such as Age Concern in Corbridge. I fully accept that they do a fantastic job, as similar organisations do in Cheltenham and as does my hon. Friend. If we have the ability to use them more, I am happy to take any suggestions on board.

I accept that Government actions are criticised and I understand that it is for us to make our case, but I make a further point that the pension credit toolkit that we reissued in April, with two versions this year, provides

[Guy Opperman]

copious advice not only to the individual who wishes to claim but to the voluntary organisations out there. I urge any voluntary organisations without access to the pension credit toolkit—which gives guidance, advice, assistance and recommendations of how to disseminate vital information to our constituents—to take it up, because it is of great importance.

All those things having been said, I want to make it clear that part of our case is that we would love pension credit take-up levels to be higher. The benefit is specifically intended to provide support to some of the poorest and most vulnerable pensioners in our community, and there is no question but that we are already committed to ensuring economic security for people at every stage of their life, especially when they reach retirement.

We are forecast to spend more than £120 billion on benefits for pensioners in 2019-20, which includes £99 billion on the state pension. As a result of the triple lock, from April 2019 the full yearly amount of the basic state pension is about £675 higher than if it had been updated just by earnings since April 2010. That is a rise of more than £1,600 in cash terms.

In respect of pension credit, the value of the standard minimum guarantee this year is the equivalent of more than £1,800 per year higher in cash terms for single people, and more than £2,700 for couples, than it was in 2010. As a Government, we also spend £2 billion a year on winter fuel payments, which are payable to all pensioners, including those on pension credit.

The overall trend in the percentage of pensioners living in poverty has been a dramatic fall over recent decades. Rates of material deprivation for pensioners are at a record low. In fact, between 2009-10 and 2017-18, material deprivation for pensioners has fallen from 10% to 7%, and rates of relative pensioner poverty before housing costs have halved since 1990. We want to maintain that achievement. It is important that hon. Members understand that more than 1.6 million people already claim pension credit. That equates to £5.4 billion of claims. Indeed, as of November 2018, there were 2,450 pension credit claimants in the constituency of the hon. Member for Ogmores, and over 100,000 in Wales as a whole.

Moving on to the point about the BBC—

Patricia Gibson: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I am going to answer several of the hon. Lady's points, but I will give way.

Patricia Gibson: Before the Minister talks about TV licences, will he tell us whether he will investigate the concerns brought to me by constituents about the claim line not being properly staffed?

Guy Opperman: I was going to come to that at a later stage, but I will address it now. I am told that there is no evidence that not enough people are manning the phone line, which is a freephone number. However, if the hon. Lady provides me with the specific information by letter, I will look into it and respond to her. She also raised the issue of the ability to communicate by post. Anybody can make an application by post; it is not restricted to Northern Ireland, as I think she seemed to

suggest. There is a difference because Northern Ireland is a devolved Administration and is dealt with in a different way, but 20% of the population make a paper claim by post. As I understand, postal applications are possible—I will be corrected if I am wrong.

Patricia Gibson rose—

Guy Opperman: I will not give way again, because I have a lot of points to cover.

I want to deal with the point that the hon. Lady and other Members made about the state pension age increase. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) is married to a former Minister, now Mother of House, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who was in favour of the state pension age in the dim distant past in 1997, when she was Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Hon. Members will understand that I am the latest in a long line of Ministers who have continued the policy of successive Governments to increase the state pension age by reason of equality legislation and the increase in life expectancy, which is light years away from the three score years and ten of our grandparents.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) raised the situation of the Scottish Government in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham; I refer the House to the letter of 22 June 2017 from my opposite number Jeane Freeman to my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), in which she explains the section 26, 28 and 24 powers under the Scotland Act 1998, which provide opportunities for the Scottish Government to intervene should they so choose, particularly in respect of the section 26 discretionary payments.

I now turn to the issue of the BBC. Its decision to limit free TV licences only to those aged 75 and over and in receipt of pension credit is disappointing. We expected it to continue the concession, and we want it to look at other options to help more elderly people who rely on TV to stay connected to the world. The BBC has indicated that it will write to all existing TV licence holders, advising them of how the new policy will work and when they need to act.

The Government look forward to hearing more from the BBC about its detailed plans for communicating and implementing that change. That is clearly a matter for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport; Government officials continue to engage with the BBC, but it would be wrong not to point out that in 2015, when the decision was made, the director-general at the time stated:

“I think we have a deal here which is a strong deal for the BBC. It gives us financial stability...The government's decision here to put the cost of the over-75s on us has been more than matched by the deal coming back for the BBC...I think being in control of our income...is a very grown-up response for the BBC and a grown-up response for any organisation”.

The House can draw its own conclusions from what Lord Hall said in 2015 and the consequent decision that it has made. I hope that the BBC will think again once it has reflected on the comments that it made in 2015 and the nature of the pushback that there has been.

Jack Dromey: Is the Minister seriously suggesting that the Government bear no responsibility whatsoever for the BBC's decision? Does that not sound like the Government are washing their hands of responsibility?

Guy Opperman: No; I was quoting what the BBC said about the fiscal settlement, which made it clear that it was a strong deal that gave the BBC financial stability, and that the decision to put the cost on the BBC had been

“more than matched by the deal coming back for the BBC”, which it then decided to take a differing approach to. Officials will continue to monitor the position.

I want to talk briefly about historical activity. Successive Governments have tried to promote pension credit, yet the take-up has remained stubbornly at around 60% for some considerable time. When pension credit was launched in 2003 there were higher figures, of up to 74%, but the Office for Budget Responsibility’s fiscal risk report from May 2008 stated that

“experience from 2003 to 2008, suggests that very large increases in take-up are unlikely”.

The Department for Work and Pensions under the Labour Government commissioned and examined that report. Successive Governments have put forward a variety of innovative approaches, but research in 2010 indicated that the most common reason given by those identified as eligible, for not claiming pension credit was that they believed they would not be entitled, typically because they had savings or other sources of income.

Patricia Gibson *rose—*

Guy Opperman: I will not give way because I only have a minute before the hon. Member for Ogmere will make his closing remarks. There are other reasons, and I urge hon. Members to publicise pension credit. I urge the voluntary organisations, which are the most trusted organisations in a community, to support the processes. We use a variety of channels to communicate information about benefits, whether pension credit or other benefits. People can check whether they are likely to be entitled using the online calculator on gov.uk, or they can make a claim by calling a freephone number.

We engage with people who may be eligible for benefits at pivotal stages, such as when they are approaching state pension age. An accompanying leaflet contains information about pension credit and advice on how to check eligibility, and a freephone telephone number if they wish to discuss their pension credit entitlement. We also target those who report a change of circumstances. We know that the best way to reach eligible customers is through trusted stakeholder organisations, which may be best placed to understand the local circumstances

and needs in their communities. That is why I strongly recommend the online toolkit for the agencies and individuals, but I welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter.

The Government are committed to increasing the number if at all possible. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the debate, and I wish him very well in his future married life.

5.28 pm

Chris Elmore: I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate today. There seems to be a bit of a Celtic theme coming from across the Scottish and Welsh nations, but I also thank all those colleagues from across the House who represent seats in England.

I thank the Minister for his response—it would be churlish of me not to—but it is disappointing, because there is a real need not just to rely on the voluntary sector to increase the use of pension credit.

Guy Opperman *indicated assent.*

Chris Elmore: I can see the Minister nodding, and I am sure he would acknowledge that. The reality is that pensioner poverty is increasing. The Government need to do more, not only in advertising; they need a constructive way, through other DWP benefits such as housing benefit, which I mentioned, to try to increase the uptake. They should be talking to Independent Age about how the Government can finally start to increase the access to pension credit.

I do not think it is just a case of the Minister’s saying that he wants to do this; the next Minister or the next Secretary of State, whoever they may be in the rolling hours, needs to take this on as a real task, to ensure that pensioners get the benefits that they are entitled to. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) said, those pensioners built this country; they deserve our support and it is crucial that they get the benefits they are entitled to. I am grateful to everyone who made a contribution, and to the Minister and various hon. Members for their congratulations on my recent marriage on Saturday. I can confirm that my wife is a good advocate for marrying an MP; she ensures that I behave myself and everything else.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 24 July 2019

HOME DEPARTMENT

Independent Office for Police Conduct: Annual Report and Accounts

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I am today, along with the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), publishing the 2018-19 annual report and accounts for the Independent Office for Police Conduct [HC 2501]. This will be laid before the House and published on www.gov.uk. The report will also be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS1804]

Justice and Home Affairs Council

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): An informal meeting of EU Interior and Justice Ministers took place on 18 to 19 July in Helsinki, Finland. The Home Office Europe Director, Chris Jones, represented the UK for interior day. The Ministry of Justice Director, International and Rights, Paul Candler, represented the UK on justice day.

Interior day began with a discussion on the future of EU internal security, where the presidency noted its intention to discuss further at the October JHA Council to inform the new Commission's work programme. In a broad ranging discussion, a number of issues were raised including: the new Commission President's commitment to promote cross-border co-operation; the importance of enhancing Europol; the use of EU funding programmes to support internal security activity; the need to modernise Prum; the importance of SIS II; and tackling child exploitation. The UK intervened to support the broad thrust of the presidency's paper, focusing on the importance on access to data and challenges from new technology, especially the need for early engagement with the private sector to protect law enforcement capabilities.

The Council then discussed the future of EU migration policy. Ministers raised a broad range of issues, with a focus on the revision of the EU's common European asylum system legislation, which remains unresolved. Other issues raised including the need to address lack of

co-operation by third countries on readmission, a focus on EU-Africa co-operation to tackle illegal migration, disembarkation platforms in third countries, the need for better external checks at the EU's borders, and the problem of secondary movements. The UK did not intervene.

Over lunch, the Finnish presidency presented to Ministers on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) by law enforcement, after which followed a brief discussion on the benefits and risks from the use of AI. Discussion addressed the need to protect people from both private sector capabilities and state actors, and considered how EU privacy concepts needed to be reconsidered in the law enforcement context. The Commission highlighted plans to prioritise consideration of the impact of AI, 5G and risks to digital infrastructure. The UK did not intervene.

After lunch, Ministers undertook a table-top exercise focused on identifying and dealing with hybrid threats. Ministers were asked to consider and vote on responses to a fictional scenario. The post-scenario discussion considered the use of the EU's solidarity clause. The UK did not intervene.

Justice day began with a discussion on the strengthening of the rule of law. Justice Ministers agreed that significant domestic responsibility for rule of law fell to them and their Ministries. National courts implemented EU law and ensured mutual trust was possible, while judicial training and judicial co-operation mechanisms were vital. All Ministers agreed, therefore, that the Justice Council should have a role. The UK noted commitment to the rules-based international order, highlighting in particular the work of the Venice Commission, the importance of sustainable development goal 16, and the benefits of direct judicial co-operation.

The Council then discussed criminal judicial co-operation, in particular, alternatives to detention and the issues relating to prison overcrowding. Discussion centred around the aim of considering alternatives to prison. For most, the aim was not reduction of prison populations but, rather, improved rehabilitation. Member states were clear that national rules should not be harmonised, but regarded mutual trust in appropriate sanctions, and in prison conditions, as a precondition for mutual recognition.

Over lunch, Ministers discuss civil judicial co-operation and multilateralism, including The Hague conference and other fora such as UNIDROIT and UNCITRAL.

[HCWS1805]

Petitions

Wednesday 24 July 2019

OBSERVATIONS

CABINET OFFICE

Climate Change

The petition of Residents of the constituency of East Worthing and Shoreham,

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world.

The petitions therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that London hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tim Loughton, *Official Report*, 18 June 2019; Vol. 662, c. 206.]

[P002464]

Petitions in the same terms were presented by the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) [P002466]; the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) [P002467]; the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) [P002469]; the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) [P002472] and the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) [P002475].

Observations from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Climate change is the biggest challenge of our times. The Government are committed to tackling the threat that climate change poses, through its domestic and international action.

To this end, the Government have legislated to reduce UK net emissions to zero by 2050. The Government are also bidding to host the 26th Conference of Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, in partnership with Italy. Our presidency of COP26 would seek to bring about transformative change in global action to tackle climate change.

EDUCATION

Funding for Russell Hall Primary School

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom

Declares that Russell Hall Primary School has seen a decline in funding per pupil and a reduction in the lump sum allocated to the school by almost £65,000 in 2018/19 and by the same in 2019/20; further that the school is facing a significant deficit budget and is having to make staff redundancies to save money, including the reduction of vital frontline teaching staff, the restructure of support staff roles and the end of additional services currently available to children such as the Early Bird Club.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to increase per pupil funding and reverse the cuts made to school budgets.

And the petitioners remain, etc. —[Presented by Judith Cummins, *Official Report*, 22 May 2019; Vol. 660, c. 274.]

[P002455]

Observations from the Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):

We recognise the budgeting challenges schools face and that we are asking them to do more. The Government have prioritised school spending, even while having to take difficult public spending decisions in other areas. As a result, core funding for schools and high needs has risen from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion this year. Funding remains high by historic standards: IFS figures show that real terms per pupil funding for 5 to 16 year olds in 2020 will be more than 50% higher than it was in 2000 and more than 70% higher than in 1990.

Spending plans beyond 2019-20 have not yet been set and naturally, we cannot pre-empt these decisions.

The introduction of the national funding formula (NFF) for schools has delivered on our promise to reform the unfair, opaque and outdated schools funding system. It is now directing money where it is most needed, based on schools' and pupils' characteristics, rather than the accidents of geography or history. Since 2017, we have given every local authority more money for every pupil in every school, while allocating the biggest increases to the schools that have been most underfunded.

The majority of school funding is determined by reference to the pupils attending a school. In addition, the NFF provides every school with a fixed lump sum of £110,000. This lump sum helps schools to manage fluctuations in their funding when pupil numbers or characteristics change. We have set the NFF lump sum at £110,000 because we think it is important to maximise how much funding is determined by the number and characteristics of pupils. The lump sum should be considered as a contribution to the fixed costs that schools are likely to face; it is not intended to match any set of precise costs.

We have provided protection in the NFF so that every school has been allocated an increase of at least 0.5% per pupil in 2018-19 and 1% in 2019-20, over its 2017-18 baseline. While the lump sum in the NFF is lower than the amount Bradford local authority had previously allocated, that has been taken into account in ensuring that every school in Bradford's final NFF allocation provides least these minimum increases in funding.

In order to smooth the transition towards the NFF, local authorities continue to be responsible for designing the distribution of funding in their areas, which could result in differences between the illustrative NFF allocations and a school's final budget.

Despite prioritising spending on schools and making the distribution of that funding fairer across the country, we do recognise that budgets remain tight. That is why we are supporting schools and headteachers to make the most of their budgets and reduce costs on things like energy, water bills and materials. In August 2018 we announced the school resource management strategy, which provides schools with practical advice on savings that can be made on the more than £10 billion non-staff spending costs across England last year. The document is available on the gov.uk website at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-excellent-school-resource-management>.

School funding

The petition of residents of Henley on Thames, Oxfordshire and of friends of the schools in the Henley area,

Declares that a funding review is needed in relation to schools in the Henley constituency; further that this school funding review should address how funding increases will be made in relation to schools in the Henley constituency in real terms beyond the amounts already being spent on schools and how to eliminate the gap between the best and lowest funded schools in the constituency; further that there must be a review of areas of inflationary pressures and situations where schools provide additional services such as social care, or deal with criminal behaviour to examine the real costs of providing education; further that there must be an assessment into the extent and access to capital funding; further that the basic entitlement must form an appropriate percentage of the national funding formula used locally; further that the Department and Treasury must ensure that small primary schools in the constituency remain integral to their communities.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to ask the Department of Education and the Treasury to conduct a review of school funding in Henley that addresses the issues stated above, in advance of the comprehensive spending review; and further requests that the findings of this review are communicated to the House of Commons.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by John Howell, Official Report, 22 May 2019; Vol. 660, c. 774]

[P002454]

Observations from the Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):

We recognise the budgeting challenges schools face and that we are asking them to do more. The Government have prioritised school spending, even while having to take difficult public spending decisions in other areas. As a result, core funding for schools and high needs has risen from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion this year.

Spending plans beyond 2019-20 have not yet been set and naturally, we cannot pre-empt these decisions. The right level of investment in our schools is crucial for a strong highly skilled productive economy and the Education Secretary will continue to back head teachers to have the resources they need to carry on delivering a world-class education.

The national funding formula (NFF) has delivered on our promise to reform the unfair, opaque and outdated schools funding system. It is now directing money where it is most needed, based on schools' and pupils' characteristics -not accidents of geography or history. Since 2017, we have given every local authority more money for every pupil in every school, while allocating the biggest increases to the schools that have been most underfunded, as we continue to address historic injustices.

However, the purpose of the national funding formula is not to give every school the same level of per pupil funding. Some schools will receive more funding than other schools due to a variety of factors, such as their level of additional needs. It is right that schools with lots of pupils with additional needs, such as those indicated by measures of deprivation or low prior attainment, should get extra funding to help those pupils who are most likely to fall behind.

The significant majority of school funding is allocated through the basic per pupil factors of the NFF. We chose to prioritise pupil-led funding in the national funding formula and used some of the additional £1.3 billion for 2018-19 and 2019-20 over and above the sums announced at the 2015 spending review, to increase the basic amount that every pupil will attract under the NFF compared to our original proposals, reflecting views received during the NFF consultation process. However, as with all other factors in the NFF, we will keep the basic per pupil amount under review and continue to consider improvements to these in consultation with stakeholders.

We recognise that small schools, particularly small primary schools in remote areas, do not necessarily have the same opportunities to find efficiencies as those elsewhere. The NFF provides a lump sum of £110,000 for every school as a contribution to the costs that do not vary with pupil numbers. This gives these schools certainty that they will attract a fixed amount each year in addition to their pupil-led funding. In addition, the sparsity factor in the formula allocates additional funding of £25 million specifically to schools that are both small and remote. A small, rural primary school eligible for sparsity funding will attract up to £135,000, in total, through the lump sum and sparsity factors.

We are collecting updated data on the condition of the school estate in England, which is due to complete in autumn 2019 and which will help inform future funding policy. We will also continue to look carefully at capital funding in preparation for the next spending review, along with all our priorities for the education system.

The petition of parents, families and carers of pupils at Vale View Primary School, Reddish,

Declares that Vale View Primary School, Mill Lane in Reddish is trying to close early on Friday afternoons to save money meaning that parents will either have to leave work early to pick their children up, or pay for child care in school; further that it will disrupt children's learning; further that Vale View is not the only school proposing this; further that schools across the country are affected thanks to real term funding cuts of £2.5 billion; further that schools are being asked to make cuts to staffing, drop subjects and other activities and are asking parents to chip in to help run them; further that we think it's ridiculous that in 2019 schools are being forced to shut their doors early, or cut entire subjects because the government won't give them the money they need; further that investment in schools is investment in our children's future; further notes a related online petition on this same matter that has received 113,610 signatures; and further that the government should be doing everything it can to make sure children in England have the best start in life and the best education to help them succeed.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to ask the Government to increase funding for schools, so they can afford the staff and equipment they need without taking cost saving measures like cutting school hours

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Andrew Gwynne, Official Report, 5 June 2019; Vol. 661, c. 233.]

[P002458]

Observations from the Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):

The structure of the school day and week should not be the cause of inconvenience to parents and carers, and it is unacceptable for schools to shorten their school day or week unless it is a direct action to support and enhance their pupils' education.

We are determined to create an education system that offers opportunity to everyone, no matter what their circumstances or where they live. Children only get one chance of a great education, so the Government have prioritised school spending, even while having to take difficult public spending decisions in other areas. As a result, core funding for schools and high needs has risen from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion this year. Funding is also high by historical standards, figures from the Institute for Fiscal Studies show that real-terms per pupil funding for five to 16-year-olds in 2020 will be more than 50% higher than it was in 2000. However, we do recognise the budgeting challenges schools face, and that we are asking them to do more.

School funding for the current year has already been determined. Spending plans beyond 2019-20 have not yet been set, and naturally we cannot pre-empt these decisions. The right level of investment in our schools is crucial for a strong, highly skilled productive economy and the Education Secretary will continue to back headteachers to have the resources they need to carry on delivering a world-class education.

Since 2017, the national funding formula (NFF) has given every local authority more money for every pupil in every school, while allocating the biggest increases to the schools that have been most underfunded. Under the NFF, Vale View Primary School has attracted 2.8% more funding per pupil, compared to 2017-18 (based on 2018-19 pupil data). This is equivalent to an extra £113 per pupil.

Local authorities continue to be responsible for designing the distribution of funding in their areas in order to smooth the transition toward the NFF, and this could mean a school's final allocation from their local authority could be different from their notional NFF allocation.

Despite prioritising spending on schools and making the distribution of that funding fairer across the country, we do recognise that budgets remain tight. That is why we are supporting schools and headteachers to make the most of their budgets and reduce costs on things like energy, water bills and materials. In August 2018 we announced the School Resource Management Strategy, which provides schools with practical advice on savings that can be made on the more than £10 billion non-staff spending costs across England last year. The document is available on the gov.uk website at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-excellent-school-resource-management>.

The petition of residents of Woodcote and friends of Langtree School,

Declares that a funding review is needed in relation to schools in the Henley constituency; further that this school funding review should address how funding increases will be made in relation to schools in the Henley constituency in real terms beyond the amounts already being spent on schools and how to eliminate the gap between the best and lowest funded schools in the constituency; further that there must be a review of

areas of inflationary pressures and situations where schools provide additional services such as social care, or deal with criminal behaviour to examine the real costs of providing education; further that there must be an assessment into the extent and access to capital funding; further that the Basic Entitlement must form an appropriate percentage of the National Funding Formula used locally; further that the Department and Treasury must ensure that small primary schools in the constituency remain integral to their communities.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to ask the Department of Education and the Treasury to conduct a review of school funding in Henley that addresses the issues stated above, in advance of the Comprehensive Spending Review; and further requests that the findings of this review are communicated to the House of Commons.

And the petitioners remain, etc. —/[Presented by John Howell, Official Report, 2 July 2019; Vol. 662, c. 1174.]

[P002483]

Observations from the Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):

We recognise the budgeting challenges schools face and that we are asking them to do more. The Government have prioritised school spending, even while having to take difficult public spending decisions in other areas. As a result, core funding for schools and high needs has risen from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion this year.

Spending plans beyond 2019-20 have not yet been set and naturally, we cannot pre-empt these decisions. The right level of investment in our schools is crucial for a strong highly skilled productive economy and the Education Secretary will continue to back headteachers to have the resources they need to carry on delivering a world-class education.

The national funding formula (NFF) has delivered on our promise to reform the unfair, opaque and outdated schools funding system. It is now directing money where it is most needed, based on schools' and pupils' characteristics -not accidents of geography or history. Since 2017, we have given every local authority more money for every pupil in every school, while allocating the biggest increases to the schools that have been most underfunded, as we continue to address historic injustices.

However, the purpose of the national funding formula is not to give every school the same level of per pupil funding. Some schools will receive more funding than other schools due to a variety of factors, such as their level of additional needs. It is right that schools with lots of pupils with additional needs, such as those indicated by measures of deprivation or low prior attainment, should get extra funding to help those pupils who are most likely to fall behind.

The significant majority of school funding is allocated through the basic per pupil factors of the NFF. We chose to prioritise pupil-led funding in the national funding formula and used some of the additional £1.3 billion for 2018-19 and 2019-20, over and above the sums announced at the 2015 spending review, to increase the basic amount that every pupil will attract under the NFF compared to our original proposals, reflecting views received during the NFF consultation process. However, as with all other factors in the NFF, we will

keep the basic per pupil amount under review and continue to consider improvements to these in consultation with stakeholders.

We recognise that small schools, particularly small primary schools in remote areas, do not necessarily have the same opportunities to find efficiencies as those elsewhere. The NFF provides a lump sum of £110,000 for every school as a contribution to the costs that do not vary with pupil numbers. This gives these schools certainty that they will attract a fixed amount each year in addition to their pupil-led funding. In addition, the sparsity factor in the formula allocates additional funding

of £25 million specifically to schools that are both small, and remote. A small, rural primary school eligible for sparsity funding will attract up to £135,000, in total, through the lump sum and sparsity factors.

We are collecting updated data on the condition of the school estate in England, which is due to complete in autumn 2019 and which will help inform future funding policy. We will also continue to look carefully at capital funding in preparation for the next spending review, along with all our priorities for the education system.

Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 24 July 2019

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Situation in the Gulf

The following is an extract from the Foreign Secretary's statement on the situation in the Gulf on 22 July 2019.

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.

[Official Report, 22 July 2019, Vol. 663, c. 1131.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs.

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) during the statement on the situation in the Gulf.

The correct response should have been:

Mr Hunt: I have just asked the Defence Secretary that very question, to which the answer is **yes, for future ships being built in the UK.**

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 24 July 2019

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Wednesday 24 July 2019

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Situation in the Gulf	15MC

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**not later than
Wednesday 31 July 2019**

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