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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 1 October 2019

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Economic Effect of No Deal

1. **Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the economic effect of the UK leaving the EU without an agreement. [912447]

11. **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect on the economy of the risk of the UK leaving the EU without an agreement. [912458]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Sajid Javid): We would prefer to leave with a deal, and we continue to work energetically and determinedly to get a better deal, but the Government are turbo charging their preparations to ensure we are ready to leave without a deal on 31 October. All necessary funds have been made available. The fundamentals of the British economy are strong: real wages are growing; employment is at a record high; and unemployment is at an historic low.

Rushanara Ali: The Government's Yellowhammer document, or base case scenario, states that there will be job losses, that food supplies will decrease and that financial services and law enforcement data and information sharing will be disrupted. Last night, we heard about customs clearance zones in Ireland and Northern Ireland, and the Brexit Secretary has admitted that there is insufficient time to complete the work. The Government spent £100 million on a PR campaign called "Get Ready for Brexit". Is it not time that the Chancellor admitted that the Government are far from ready for Brexit and instead are heading for causing chaos in our country?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will appreciate that the uncertainty around Brexit has caused businesses significant concern. They want to see the Government deliver Brexit and leave on 31 October, and that is what we will do. Significant preparations have been made for a no deal, including trade agreements reached, increases in personnel at Border Force and more than 600 statutory instruments laid in this Parliament. If she wants to help, she should support the Government in getting a deal.

Helen Hayes: There is evidence of a rise in short positions being taken out against the pound. Is the Chancellor confident that the hedge funds taking those short positions, some of which donated to the Prime Minister's leadership campaign and the Conservative party, have no inside information about the planning or timing of a no-deal Brexit?

Sajid Javid: That is such a ridiculous suggestion it does not deserve an answer.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If we leave the EU without an agreement, do we get to keep the £39 billion?

Sajid Javid: The figure of £39 billion is based on a deal. If we end up leaving with no deal, that £39 billion number is no longer relevant.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Is the Chancellor aware that the chief executive of the port of Dover has said that we are 100% ready to leave the EU, and will he help that readiness by bringing forward plans to dual the A2 to the port of Dover?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing the House's attention to this issue. I am aware of that. I know, for example, that the investment the Government have made through Border Force, including the extra officers, is helping, and I am confident that in all circumstances we can keep trade flowing.

22. [912471] **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): We know that a no-deal Brexit would cost up to 100,000 jobs in Scotland and cost each family £2,300 a year. Is that really a price worth paying for the Prime Minister to break the law and go out with no deal?

Sajid Javid: We do not know that at all. That is just scaremongering from the Scottish National party. We know that businesses throughout the UK, including in Scotland, want this uncertainty to end and want us to leave on 31 October.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Does the Chancellor agree that if we were to leave with no deal, there could be a potential economic impact on our European partners and that therefore it is as much in the EU's interests to reach a deal as it is in ours?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend has made an important point: it is in everyone's interests—ours and our European friends and partners—that we reach a deal. Intensive negotiations are going on, both with the Irish Government and with other European partners, and there is a very strong recognition that it is in all our interests that we reach a deal.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Is the Chancellor aware that the Office for Budget Responsibility's alarming fiscal analysis of a no-deal Brexit assumes that the Government's preparations are successful—and so result in a miraculously benign no-deal Brexit—and that even with this least-damaging no-deal Brexit the OBR predicts a hit to Britain's finances that would destroy every single spending announcement by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor? Given that, is it

not unacceptable for a Chancellor in a Government publicly contemplating a no-deal Brexit to fail to tell the truth to the British public that spending on health, schools and police will be slashed in the event of a no-deal Brexit?

Sajid Javid: First, I do not recognise that picture at all. It has been made up by the Liberal Democrats. Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman talks about what is unacceptable. What is unacceptable is for the Liberal Democrats to pretend that the referendum on the European Union never happened.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): We have heard in the media today that the UK Government will have proposals ready to send to the EU by the end of the Tory conference this week. The Prime Minister's main negotiating strategy seems to be to convince the EU that we are willing to accept no deal, and hope that it will capitulate at the last minute. Can the Chancellor name one occasion on which the EU has folded at the last minute in international negotiations?

Sajid Javid: Can the hon. Lady name a single negotiation in which we have not had the ability to walk away, out of the room?

Kirsty Blackman: These are supposed to be questions to the Chancellor, not to me.

Businesses are not ready for a no-deal Brexit. They are already losing EU workers, and are closing down as a result. In a no-deal Brexit, they will be hit by tariffs, and many more of them will sink as a result of that. People will lose their jobs. Given that there is now less than a month until Brexit day, does the Chancellor really believe that there is time to negotiate a deal? If not, will he ensure that the Prime Minister respects the law and requests an extension?

Sajid Javid: Significant work is going on to prepare the whole country for a potential no-deal outcome, and that includes helping businesses. I have allocated an additional £2.1 billion on top of the £2 billion that was already there, and that means that we can do much more to help businesses, including sending them more than 750 communications on preparedness and more than 100 technical notices.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): The Government's current policy is that we can have higher public spending, falling debt and a no-deal Brexit, but those three things are impossible to deliver together, so on which of them are the Government not telling the truth?

Sajid Javid: The Government are focused on leaving the European Union on 31 October. We are trying to do that with a deal, but if we do not, we will leave with no deal. The hon. Gentleman talks about the Government's policy. At least this Government have a clear policy on Brexit; what is the policy of the Labour party?

Loan Charge

3. **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): If he will make it his policy to suspend the 2019 loan charge for the duration of the review of that charge commissioned by his Department. [912449]

5. **Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): If he will make it his policy to suspend the 2019 loan charge for the duration of the review commissioned by his Department of that charge. [912451]

9. **Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): What (a) support and (b) financial relief he plans to provide to people subject to the 2019 loan charge during the duration of the independent review of that charge. [912455]

14. **Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): If he will make it his policy to suspend the 2019 loan charge for the duration of the review of that charge; and if he will make a statement. [912461]

17. **Anne Milton** (Guildford) (Ind): If he will suspend 2019 loan charge repayments for the duration of the review of that charge. [912465]

18. **Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): If he will make it his policy to suspend the 2019 loan charge for the duration of his Department's review of that charge. [912466]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): The Government have listened to concerns expressed across the House about the loan charge, and, as the House will know, an independent review is now in progress under the leadership of Sir Amyas Morse. While it is under way, it is right for the loan charge to remain in force and for the Government to implement legislation on which the House agreed. The review will conclude by mid-November, to let anyone who may be affected know, and to give people time to plan in advance of the January self-assessment filing deadline. To help taxpayers who may need longer to pay, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has confirmed again that there is no maximum time limit for payment plans.

Mr Bone: The loan charge is the worst form of retrospective taxation. It is causing real hardship and distress to law-abiding taxpayers, and this week it was reported that a seventh person had taken their own life because of it. How many more people are going to take their lives before the loan charge is scrapped?

Jesse Norman: Let me correct my hon. Friend on the facts. We have been notified of three suicides that may have some connection with the loan charge, and which have been referred to the Independent Office for Police Conduct. In one case there has been a referral back to HMRC, but in all other cases there has been no further development, so I do not recognise the picture that my hon. Friend has described. Let me also remind him that although these effects have been much bruited, there is also the question of collecting the several billion pounds of back tax that is due.

Nic Dakin: What is clear is that the retrospective loan charge is causing huge pain and upset as people's livelihoods and homes are threatened. Will the Minister ensure that the review hears directly from people who have been so affected, and will he either suspend the loan charge or at least tell HMRC that those who have signed a settlement agreement can pause their payments until the review has been concluded?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful for the question. Of course any injury to individuals from any act of Government or their agencies is to be deeply regretted. I recognise that, and if it has happened here, it is appropriate for the House to feel that way.

I have no powers to direct Sir Amyas Morse. I understand that he is taking evidence from external sources, including the loan charge all-party parliamentary group and the Loan Charge Action Group, which acts as its secretariat. I have met the APPG and the secretariat separately. So the matter is being fully addressed. The details of settlement have been set out on gov.uk.

Mr David Davis: On the issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) raised with the Minister, the hard fact is that seven people facing challenge or investigation for the loan charge have taken their own lives. He can attribute cause as he wishes. The fact is also that the distress has been caused by the historical incompetence of HMRC and the subsequent willingness of Ministers to use retrospective taxation. Are the Government going to give up on the premise of using retrospective taxation, or does it fall to the House to pass laws that will stop them doing so in future?

Jesse Norman: The legislation is not retrospective. [HON. MEMBERS: "It is."] There are defined circumstances in which HMRC and the Government may seek to use retrospective taxation, and they do so with extreme care and attention. All that I am doing is referring my right hon. Friend to the facts as reported to the IOPC. As he will be aware, these are immensely difficult cases in which many circumstances and factors may be in play.

Dr Offord: Despite the review, the loan charge remains in place and HMRC continues to pursue people for advance payment notices for which there is no right of appeal. That clearly goes against the spirit of the review. Will the Minister now suspend all activity?

Jesse Norman: The review is designed to assess whether the Government's policy is appropriate, and it would be wrong to change it until the review has had chance to make a decision on it. The Treasury and the House have a great interest in supporting the provision of public services, which the recovery of tax avoided in this way, in many ways egregiously, is designed to fund.

Anne Milton: I honestly do not think that the Minister is paying attention. These comments are coming from Members behind him, not opposite him. [HON. MEMBERS: "From all sides."] These people followed professional advice and declared their arrangements to HMRC, which did nothing. Yet it is now going back and taxing them retrospectively, all the way back to 1999 in some circumstances. The Minister cannot stand at the Dispatch Box and just ignore what he is hearing from the Benches behind him.

Jesse Norman: Nothing could be further from the truth. We are carefully attending to concerns that have been expressed. That is why I announced changes in July and have written on two occasions to colleagues to inform them of changes and developments. That is why we have instituted this independent loan charge review, the purpose of which is precisely to scrutinise the extent to which Government policy is appropriate.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The Minister is bound to be aware of the scale of concern across the House and among those who are directly affected. He has outlined a date of mid-November. Immediately upon that date being reached, will he take urgent action to assist those affected?

Jesse Norman: I have no idea what the loan charge review will conclude, but I guarantee that we will look at its findings with all due speed and dispatch.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Ind): Like many Members, I have constituents who have been egregiously affected by the loan charge. The Minister's response is unacceptable from their perspective. He should suspend all the loan charge activity while the review is under way and until the Government have responded to it. What preparation is happening in HMRC for the policy shift if the review says that the loan charge is unfair and needs to be changed? How will he deal with my constituents who have already had to pay but may be proven to have paid erroneously?

Jesse Norman: I am unable to comment on what the review will conclude. We can certainly look at whether there may be changes that HMRC would take rapidly thereafter. It possesses the capacity to do so quite quickly if necessary, as does Government. We will have to review that moment when it comes.

19. [912467] **Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP):** Seven needless deaths; seven families tragically left to deal with the consequences, and yet companies such as AML that have promoted the schemes are getting away scot-free. AML and its director, Doug Barrowman, appear to have moved away with no consequences whatever. In fact, they are boasting that HMRC is not pursuing them for any assets or unpaid taxes. Will the Minister detail the efforts that are being taken against such companies, which have caused so much pain and tragedy?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to focus on the activity of the promoters. They are extremely ingenious in operating within the framework of law, but doing some very nasty and duplicitous things. They often operate offshore and it is extremely difficult to close them down when they are constantly mutating from one company to another. I assure hon. Members that we are looking at the problem extremely closely, and I hope to return to the House at some point fairly soon with some thoughts.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Ind): I worry that the Government characterise those who are suffering from the loan charge as in some way egregious tax avoiders, when it is abundantly clear that in the case of my constituents they acted on advice, openly, and in the belief that the scheme was approved by HMRC. I also worry that HMRC is behaving towards taxpayers in a fashion that is new, and in many cases, tax advisers say, unprecedented. I also think that the retrospectivity is deeply questionable.

Jesse Norman: I must say, I am surprised to hear a man of my right hon. and learned Friend's legal standing and status regard this as retrospective, because it plainly

is not. [HON. MEMBERS: “It is!”] There are many parts of tax policy that have to look back to the basis of an asset or a liability, and that has happened here. In this case, HMRC has taken quite vigorous action over the years, in different forms, to let people know. Of course, it is subject to the loan charge review; we will see what that concludes. However, I remind my right hon. and learned Friend that these people were in many cases paying very little or zero in tax. [Interruption.] Of course the circumstances can differ, but there are a large number of people who knew, or should have known, that they were avoiding tax, and doing so un—

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We must speed up.

Living Standards

4. **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of his fiscal policies on living standards. [912450]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Sajid Javid): The recent spending round has delivered the fastest real growth in day-to-day spending in 15 years, targeting additional money on the people's priorities of healthcare, education and tackling crime. We will publish alongside the next Budget an analysis of how these spending changes are distributed.

Alison Thewliss: We on the SNP Benches welcome the Chancellor's announcement on his pretendy living wage, because we have been calling for it for four years, but his promises still fall 5p short of the London living wage today, never mind in 2024. A 16-year-old today would have to wait five years to be entitled to it. Will he end the state-sanctioned age discrimination of his pretendy living wage, so that all people, regardless of age, can receive a fair day's pay for a fair day's work?

Sajid Javid: I welcome the hon. Lady's support. It was this Government who introduced a national living wage in 2016. It was this Government who increased the rate, as recently as April this year. The announcement that we have made, which I will have more to say about later, will help to end—actually will end—low pay for good in our great country.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The best way to improve living standards is to reduce tax burdens. Does the Chancellor share my concern that anyone in Scotland earning more than £27,000 is paying more than the equivalent English taxpayer, and that more than 1 million Scots are paying £500 million in extra taxation?

Sajid Javid: I believe the First Minister actually promised not to raise taxes, but in fact the SNP has raised taxes on more than 1 million Scots. Doctors, teachers and police are all paying more in Scotland than in any other part of the UK. Scotland is now the highest-taxed part of the UK, and the Scottish people will remember that at the next Scottish elections.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): Since this Government came to power, they have relied heavily on monetary policy. The Chancellor of the Exchequer will know that

quantitative easing and interest rates have now been cut to the bone. Is he concerned by noises coming from the Bank of England that interest rates could rise, and the effect that that would have on heavily indebted middle-income families?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman should know that the Bank of England is independent, and therefore monetary policy decisions are independent. I know that his friends on the Opposition Front Bench do not recognise or respect that, but it is a very important part of our economic system.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): The Chancellor will know that one of the Government's fiscal policies that is fundamentally wrong is the loan charge retrospective taxes on our constituents. Whether it is one death, no deaths or seven deaths, families are being destroyed because of the retrospective charge. Surely we should put a stop to it now.

Mr Speaker: Order. The matter in hand is the effect of fiscal policies on living standards.

Sajid Javid: Well, it is fiscal policy, Mr Speaker, in the interests of my right hon. Friend, and he is right to raise the matter. He will have heard the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, in answer to the previous question, point to the independent inquiry that is taking place, led by a gentleman who has considerable respect. We will await the outcome of that inquiry.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): The effects of the Government's fiscal policies on living standards have been devastating, especially for vulnerable people, so is it still Government policy to remove the benefits freeze in April 2020?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman talks about the Government's fiscal policy, which is a core part of our overall economic policy, and it is that policy that has led to a jobs boom, with 3.7 million more people in work since 2010, and over 1 million fewer working households in our country living in poverty. The real threat to the living standards of working people is the agenda of the Labour party.

Peter Dowd: It would have been helpful to get an answer to the question. We have a Prime Minister who cannot be candid even with the Queen, a Health Secretary who claims there will be 40 hospital rebuilds when in fact it is just six reconfigurations, and a Chancellor who worked at a senior level for a bank that a US Senate Committee found had caused

“material damage to ordinary people and the wider global economy”. Why would anyone believe a word that this self-serving Government say? They are led by a Prime Minister who, many claim, believes that telling the truth is an illness to be avoided.

Sajid Javid: I do not believe that I detected a question.

Free-to-use Cash Machines

6. **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the reduction of free-to-use cash machines on high streets on people's access to cash. [912452]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

The UK has an extensive and internationally enviable free ATM network. We know that many people still use cash day to day, and we have committed to safeguarding cash for those who need it. I am delighted that UK Finance and LINK are leading industry efforts to protect free cash access. That culminated in UK Finance launching the Community Access to Cash initiative just yesterday.

Mrs Hodgson: The Minister says that, but news that NoteMachine is to convert 3,000 of its 7,000 free-to-use cash machines to pay-to-use machines is of great concern to my constituents. According to Which?, we have lost 15% of our free-to-use ATMs over the past year alone. The previous Labour Government formed an agreement with ATM operators and the Treasury to plug gaps in financially deprived areas where people had to pay to access their cash, so what are this Government going to do to prevent people being charged just for trying to access their own money?

John Glen: Use of cash has reduced significantly faster than expected over the past 10 years. I am meeting UK Finance and LINK tomorrow to ensure that their mechanism is good for the current situation. The new initiative to which I referred in my previous response will give communities up and down the country the opportunity to engage with UK Finance on better and new solutions.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: We will hear from a Devon knight, I think. Sir Gary Streeter.

Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): Is not the closure of ATMs linked to the decision by high street banks to close their branches left, right and centre? Will the Minister, in his regular meetings with the chief executives of high street banks, remind them that they do have some duty to elderly customers and small businesses?

John Glen: I do that regularly. We are also trying to ensure that the transfer of responsibility to the Post Office runs smoothly, because 99% of people live within 1 mile of a post office, so it is a very good alternative for the vast majority of their banking services.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Hull's high street is still very cash-reliant, and I am really worried about the blow that this reduction will give to an already struggling high street. Will the Economic Secretary please speak directly to the Payment Systems Regulator about what further measures can be taken to prevent the reduction in free-to-access cash machines?

John Glen: Yes, I am very happy to continue to engage with the regulator, and I noted the hon. Lady's urgent question application earlier today. Digital payment alternatives improve local cash recycling and support cashback initiatives. Mastercard and Visa have a number of initiatives under way, and I am determined to see progress in this area.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): With a third of banks, many of which had ATMs, closing in rural areas, and with very poor mobile connectivity in those areas meaning that digital payment schemes are not possible, I was very pleased to learn of yesterday's announcement by UK Finance on Community Access to Cash, to which the Economic Secretary referred. That is the way forward, but what can he do to reassure business providers that if they provide ATMs, they will be safe from break-in?

John Glen: We have to ensure that there is a wide range of options in rural areas. A number of trials are under way to provide solutions, underpinned by the investment in gigabit infrastructure that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced yesterday, which will ensure that we have even better connectivity in remote rural areas.

Rough Sleeping

7. Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on the adequacy of funding allocated to tackling rough sleeping. [912453]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Sajid Javid): The Government remain committed to ending rough sleeping. That is why I announced £54 million of new funding to reduce homelessness and rough sleeping in last month's spending round, following on from discussions with my right hon. Friend the Housing Secretary, which will take total resource funding to £422 million next year.

Neil Coyle: It has been revealed today that two rough sleepers died on the streets every day last year. The Government committed to halving rough sleeping by 2022, but their own guesstimate is that it fell by only 74 people last year, not the 500 required for them to be on target. That puts them three decades behind schedule, so when will the Treasury provide councils and homelessness charities with sufficient funds to properly tackle this national shame?

Sajid Javid: This is an important issue, and I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has raised it today. He will know that there are multiple causes of rough sleeping, which means that we need action across Government. That is why the Government have set out a rough sleeping initiative to deal with the causes, such as mental health, family breakdown and addictions. I think he will appreciate that we need cross-Government work. That needs to be properly funded. The £422 million that I referred to a moment ago is a 13% real-terms increase, and it will end rough sleeping by 2022.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Many people going to work today, not just in London but in cities and towns across England, will have seen at least one fellow citizen sleeping rough. Eight thousand beds have been lost, universal credit has cost tenants their homes, and as we have heard, 726 people died on the streets last year. Charities say that the funding gap is £1 billion. The Chancellor has said that ending rough sleeping is in our gift, but how many more of our fellow citizens will have slept on our streets before he delivers?

Sajid Javid: I hope that the hon. Lady welcomes the extra resources being put into fighting homelessness and rough sleeping—as I said, a 13% real-terms increase. She might recall that when I was Housing Secretary, we introduced new programmes to deal properly with rough sleeping, for example the Housing First pilots that are taking place in three parts of our country and showing real resource. We are starting to see falls in rough sleeping for the first time in a number of years, and I think the British people would appreciate cross-party co-operation on this very important issue.

NHS Hospital Projects

8. **Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): What progress he has made on the allocation of capital funding for new NHS hospital projects. [912454]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Rishi Sunak): The Government have just announced the largest hospital building programme in a generation, with £2.7 billion of investment in six new large hospitals. I am delighted that one of those is the Princess Alexandra in my right hon. Friend's constituency, and I pay tribute to him for his years of campaigning for his constituents on this issue.

Robert Halfon: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the hundreds of millions of pounds pledged for a new hospital for Harlow will mean not only that we have a building fit for purpose for the 21st century, but we will continue to attract the best and brightest staff, including through healthcare apprenticeships?

Rishi Sunak: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. May I take this opportunity to congratulate all the hard-working staff in his trust for their efforts in campaigning for this. They do a wonderful job serving their community, and I am delighted that with this support they will have the resources they need to keep doing that for years to come.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): This is just a fraction of the hospital building programme that took place under the last Labour Government. Why on earth should anyone believe a single word this Government say, given that they themselves admit that a no-deal Brexit will damage the economy and the public finances? So there will be less money for hospitals and everything else, will there not?

Rishi Sunak: The legacy of the last Labour Government's hospital building programme is that we are left with £10 billion in private finance initiative payments every year, rather than this being spent on people's healthcare. This Government are investing in hospital upgrades up and down the country, with 20 announced on the steps of Downing Street, six more announced this past weekend and business plans for another 20 more—and diagnostic equipment. This Government are committing to the NHS, and we will ensure that every patient gets the care and consideration they deserve.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I welcome the announcement of the makeover of the out-patient facilities at Heartlands Hospital, which serves some of the most deprived wards in east Birmingham and in my

constituency. Does the Minister agree that it is possible to put this additional capital spending into the health service only because a Conservative Government have repaired the nation's finances?

Rishi Sunak: I welcome my right hon. Friend's comments. She is absolutely right: the only way we get strong public services is with a strong economy, and the only way we get a strong economy is with a Conservative Government.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Oh very well. I call Tim Farron.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): You are very kind, Mr Speaker. In his announcement this week, the Chancellor chose not to invest a single penny in the Westmorland General Hospital in Kendal, but will he at least end the Treasury's 3% deficit tax on our local hospitals trust, which has cost £4 million from hospital spending in the past three years? That is money that should have been spent on a new radiotherapy centre for local cancer patients.

Rishi Sunak: On cancer treatments, I am delighted that survival rates are at the highest they have ever been. On diagnostic treatments, the recent announcement of £200 million to upgrade diagnostic equipment up and down the country will make an enormous difference to early screening and testing. On funding in general, we are in the first year of a record five-year investment in the NHS—£34 billion more promised by this Government.

Student Funding: 16 to 19-year-olds

10. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on raising the per student rate of 16 to 19 funding. [912457]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Sajid Javid): Treasury Ministers regularly engage with Secretaries of State on all aspects of public funding, including 16 to 19 education funding. At the spending round, we chose to invest £400 million more in the sector next year, which will mean that the base rate of funding will rise to £4,188 and be growing at a faster rate than core school funding.

Daniel Zeichner: Away from the fantasy figures being peddled in Manchester this week, college heads and principals are struggling to work out whether to continue to raise their class sizes or to restrict subject choice. Will the Chancellor therefore tell Cambridge Regional College and the excellent sixth forms and sixth-form colleges in Cambridge whether they are going to be getting the extra £760 that the Raise the Rate campaign has calculated is necessary or the meagre £188 per pupil per year he is offering?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman might call these fantasy figures, but this is the biggest increase in funding for 16 to 19-year-olds in a decade, and it has been hugely welcomed by the sector. It includes £212 million of targeted interventions, on the courses that are the most costly to deliver, such as engineering and construction. I would have thought he would have welcomed that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. If the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) wishes to shoehorn his Question 20, which will not be reached, into this Question 10, which has been, he is free to do so. If he takes me up on his generous offer, we will have a double dose of Daniel.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Question 20, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: No, no, your moment is now, Sir. Your opportunity has arrived—expatiate.

20. [912468] **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): The Chancellor will know that in Shropshire we have received a fraction of schools funding compared with inner-city metropolitan areas. This has a significant impact on the fabric of our school buildings and the opportunities for helping children with special educational needs. What steps is he taking to ensure that more money is provided for the Department for Education to support rural schools such as my local schools in Shropshire?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend will know that in the spending round I announced a £4.6 billion increase in school spending. I know that he has campaigned on funding for his local schools and can tell him that 80% of the secondary schools in his area will see their funding level go up to at least the new minimum level of £5,000 per pupil.

Small Businesses

12. **Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to encourage small businesses to expand. [912459]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Mr Simon Clarke): A new business starts in the UK every 75 seconds. Following the patient capital review, we announced a £20 billion action plan to finance growth in innovative firms. To support that, we have established a new business finance council to ensure that Government, banks and other lenders work together to help small and medium-sized enterprises to access the finance that they need.

Huw Merriman: I welcome all of the Treasury team to their places and thank the former Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), for letting me work so closely with him. It was an amazing privilege.

I spent an amazing day with my constituency businesses in the village of Beckley. They are concerned about business rates, on which I support their call for reform, as well as about the VAT threshold and lack of taper. They will also now be writing to me about the welcome increase to the national living wage. Can we do more to support small businesses? They are the backbone of rural economies and without them we will not have employment.

Mr Clarke: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and take this chance to thank him, on behalf of the Government, for the work he did with the former Chancellor. He is quite right to talk about tax reform.

Of course, since 2016 we have announced business rates reforms and reductions worth more than £13 billion by 2023-2024. On VAT, in the run-up to the 2018 Budget we consulted on the threshold, which is the highest in the EU and the OECD. We have committed to keep that in place until 2022, but I am genuinely always interested in suggestions that I can discuss with colleagues.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): When is the Minister going to do something about the delays in payment to small businesses that often affect their cash-flow? We have debated the issue for many years; is it not about time that the Minister did something about it?

Mr Clarke: Responsibility for this issue falls between the Treasury and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. A late-payment regulator has been set up. I talked about this issue with businesses at the Conservative party conference on Sunday; I take it very seriously and they highlighted it as an ongoing concern. It should come out loud and clear from the House that all businesses, particularly larger ones, have a responsibility to meet their payment terms, because that is crucial for small businesses. I think everyone in the House can unite around that common principle.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: East Yorkshire knight—Sir Gregory Knight.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Is the Minister aware that one of the main difficulties facing small rural businesses is the non-availability of fast and reliable broadband? In the light of the announcement that the Chancellor made yesterday in Manchester, can we now assume that the days in which a geographically isolated business is also digitally isolated really are numbered?

Mr Clarke: My right hon. Friend is of course absolutely right that broadband connectivity lies at the heart of a modern economy. It was so welcome to hear my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer yesterday set out how £5 billion of investment is going to be devoted to making sure that we can deliver on the Prime Minister's pledge to ensure full fibre broadband access by 2025.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister outline whether he has considered tax incentives for businesses to take on apprentice staff in administrative roles, with special reference to young people from learning-difficulty backgrounds, who take more time and patience to train? There are simply not enough places available; will the Minister undertake to make places available?

Mr Clarke: Again, that is a unifying principle to bring to the House. The Government have done an awful lot to try to promote the uptake of apprentices—we have seen action on things such as national insurance to try to make it more affordable for businesses to employ young people. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is very interested in all the work that goes on around supporting access into work for disabled people and people with learning disabilities, and would be interested to hear more from the hon. Gentleman about those ideas.

Moray Growth Deal

13. **Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the Moray growth deal. [912460]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Mr Simon Clarke): I discuss matters of importance regarding the Scottish economy with Government colleagues on a regular basis. In July, £32.5 million was allocated for the Moray growth deal.

Douglas Ross: The £32.5 million investment that the Minister has just mentioned, which was also matched by the Scottish Government, made the Moray growth deal the highest funded per head of population anywhere in the country. The next key milestone will be the signing of the heads of terms, so can he update us on the progress made towards that?

Mr Clarke: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He has been a great champion for the growth deal, which will unlock huge benefits for the people of Moray. We hope to settle the heads of terms this month to allow this whole project to move forward quickly.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I think that we are about to hear the prodigious knowledge of the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) on the Moray growth deal. Wonders never cease.

21. [912470] **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Local growth deals like Moray's would greatly help regional development. The shared prosperity fund would greatly help with improvements to the Ebbw Vale to Cardiff train line, so will the Minister please meet me to consider that possibility?

Mr Clarke: That was a truly ingenious question. Of course, the UK shared prosperity fund is really important. We continue to make good progress on its design. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government officials have so far held 26 engagement events across the UK with over 500 representatives from a breadth of sectors. This is something that, obviously, has massive implications for Wales, and we are very happy to ensure that we engage everyone in that process.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The Moray growth deal, like the Clackmannanshire and Tay Cities growth deals, is bringing unprecedented investment into Scotland. Are the Minister and the Treasury considering reprofiling the investment over 10 years, as opposed to 15, as the local councils are asking me to do, so that we can get this investment and this transformational change in our communities?

Mr Clarke: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Clearly, we want to see this investment move forward as quickly as possible. If he wants to raise that matter with us and indeed with the Secretary for Scotland, we can certainly talk about it, but I obviously cannot make any commitments here today.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): On the subject of growth deals, may I ask the Minister, in addition to discussions on the Moray growth deal, what discussions has he had with Cabinet colleagues on the progress of the Mid Wales growth deal?

Mr Clarke: We are committed to bringing forward growth deals across the UK. Obviously, in the devolved Administration areas, we want to bring forward money from our side, but with effect from the Welsh and Scottish Governments as well. We want to see progress across the UK; it is not restricted to Scotland.

Free Ports: Foreign Businesses

15. **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): What (a) tax incentives and (b) regulatory changes he plans to introduce to encourage foreign businesses to use free ports in the UK. [912462]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Rishi Sunak): We are developing an ambitious and attractive UK free port offer to create hubs that will attract inward investment, create jobs and boost trade. Typically, free ports only offer customs benefits, but we are looking to go further than that to ensure that these turbo-charged areas can drive growth for their community.

Melanie Onn: I thank the Minister for that answer and for his speculative phone call earlier trying to tease out the nature of my question to him. The Conservative Mayor for Tees Valley, a member of the Government's very carefully selected free ports advisory group, says that he hopes to see reduced corporation tax and exemption from employers' national insurance contributions. Has the Minister made an assessment of the impact of these Tory proposals on the Exchequer and the state pension fund?

Rishi Sunak: I pay tribute to the Conservative Mayor, Ben Houghton, in Teesside for championing his community. He has been advocating a free port because he believes that such a phenomenon will create jobs in his area, drive inward investment and boost trade. I hope that the hon. Lady would welcome that for her community in Grimsby, where the seafood industry and Associated British Ports, the port employer, has loudly called for such free port status for her area. I hope that, when the opportunity comes, she will support her community in applying for that.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): My right hon. Friend is truly a champion of free ports, but will he agree to meet me to discuss the potential benefits for ports such as the port of Poole and the advantage for the wider region as well?

Rishi Sunak: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend. I believe that it is his birthday today, so I wish him a happy birthday. I am happy meet him and his colleagues from Poole to discuss free ports. We believe that these should be opportunities for the entire country to take advantage of.

Mr Speaker: The unadulterated charm of the Chief Secretary has, in my experience, not been surpassed—at any rate among Treasury Ministers.

Tax Thresholds

16. **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the effect of increases in income tax thresholds on income distribution in the last 10 years. [912463]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): That was a cruel blow for my right hon. Friend, Mr Speaker, if I may say so.

In answer to the hon. Lady's question, the House will I am sure rejoice that between 2010 and 2019 the personal allowance has been increased by more than 90%, so that those on the lowest incomes do not pay any income tax, and since 2015-16 alone 1.74 million people have been taken out of income tax altogether. We will publish a full distributional analysis of the recent spending round alongside the next Budget, and it will also capture the effect of any budgetary announcements made at that time.

Janet Daby: Can the Minister explain how it is fair that a small handful at the very top have run into the distance, making up the top 10% of the population and owning 44% of the nation's wealth?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady may not be aware that at the moment the top 1% of the country pay 29% of all tax. That is up from the 25% in 2010-11.

Topical Questions

T1. [912472] **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Sajid Javid): I have three clear priorities as Chancellor: to ensure a strong economy, to get Brexit done and to deliver on the British people's priorities. That is why I am pleased to confirm that this Government will bring an end to low pay. We are setting two new targets for the national living wage over the next five years: raising it to two thirds of median earnings and extending it to workers aged 21 and above. That will give 4 million workers an average pay rise of £4,000. I will set out further details in the next Budget. This Government are proving again that they are on the side of working people. Thanks to the hard work of the British people, we are moving from a decade of recovery to a decade of renewal.

Christine Jardine: When the Chancellor was Home Secretary, he told me and other More United MPs that officials were looking into the potential economic benefits of lifting the ban on asylum seekers working, which the Lift the Ban coalition says would bring £42 million into the economy. Now that he is Chancellor of the Exchequer, will he lift that ban in order to allow asylum seekers such as those in my constituency to contribute to the economy and to have the dignity that they deserve?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady makes an important point, and I am glad that she has brought my attention to it again. As Chancellor, I want to ensure that across Government every Department is doing its bit for the economy. Some of the people she is talking about will

be vulnerable people and the current rules are worth looking at again. It is something that the Home Office is taking very seriously.

T5. [912477] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, those affected by the devastating loan charge have welcomed the independent review, but feel that it would be better conducted by a tax judge. Does the Minister agree? Does he also agree that a suitable outcome of the review would be to apply the loan charge only from when it was introduced, in 2016, not retrospectively?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I have addressed the substance of it, but let me make a point about Sir Amyas Morse. I think that Sir Amyas is a superb choice. As my hon. Friend may be aware, in a debate in the House of Commons on 6 March 2019, the Chamber united across the parties in praise of Sir Amyas. The Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), called him

"a fearless advocate for what is good in the public sector and for challenging Governments of whatever party".

The Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), said that he was not only "unfailingly courteous", but had

"an intelligence of steel. He has a knack for calling out obfuscation, fudge and imprecision",

and

"a reputation for being completely fair."—[*Official Report*, 6 March 2019; Vol. 655, c. 1004-05.]

He is a very good choice to lead this review.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Will the Chancellor give the House a quick fact-check of his speech yesterday? The Conservatives have cut funding for buses by £640 million a year. Yesterday, he announced nothing new; he simply reannounced £220 million from the spending review. His Government have cut £900 million a year from annual youth services budgets. Yesterday, he offered £500 million, possibly as a one-off. The National Infrastructure Commission says that we need £33 billion to roll out full-fibre broadband. Yesterday, he offered £5 billion. All of those promises will count for nothing if there is a no-deal Brexit. Has he not just followed the Cummings code: grab a headline, possibly wrap it around a bus and ignore the truth? But there is one figure that I would like to ask him about: 120,000. What significance does the figure 120,000 have for him?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman knows that the last time his party was in office, we had the biggest budget deficit in our peacetime history and the biggest banking collapse this country has ever seen, and our country was virtually bankrupt. Now our economy is strong, with the lowest unemployment rate in 45 years, and it is because the economy is strong that yesterday I could make the announcement of investments in buses, roads, youth facilities and full fibre. If he wants to see that kind of investment continue at the next general election, he should vote Conservative.

John McDonnell: I did not ask about the Chancellor's record at Deutsche Bank; I never asked about the products he was selling that brought about the financial crash.

Let me tell the Chancellor what the figure 120,000 means. It is the number of deaths linked by the *British Medical Journal* to the Conservatives' cuts since they came to power in 2010. No amount of spin will wash away the memory of nine years of this scale of human suffering. He claimed yesterday:

"We believe in a society where everyone knows that if they work hard, and play by the rules then they will have every opportunity to succeed."

But isn't it true that the Conservatives have broken the link between people working and being able to lift themselves out of poverty, when 70% of our children living in poverty are in households where someone is at work? And isn't it the case that, despite the Chancellor's pathetic attempt yesterday at playing catch-up to Labour party policy, under the Tories' plans no one will reach the Tories' target minimum wage until five years from now? And isn't it the truth that, with this Chancellor and Prime Minister in charge, the Conservatives will always be the party of tax avoiders, bankers and the super-rich?

Sajid Javid: Let me tell the right hon. Gentleman a fact: the Labour party no longer represents working people and it is no longer the party of working people. That stopped a long, long time ago. He should reflect on his own policies of renationalisation; mass confiscation of private property, including the shares and homes of individual investors; protectionism; and state control. He calls business the real enemy, but the fact is that the Labour party is no longer fit to govern. It would wreck the economy and it would be hard-working people who would pay the price.

Amber Rudd (Hastings and Rye) (Ind): I have had heartbreaking meetings with constituents from Hastings regarding the loan charge, where I have heard tragic and sad stories about the destruction of families and their finances. Although I of course welcome the review that is to take place, may I urge the Chancellor to reconsider the position of not suspending the loan charge during the review period?

Jesse Norman: I do not know whether my right hon. Friend caught the discussion we had about this matter earlier, but the purpose of the review is to establish whether the Government are pursuing the right policy. It makes no sense at all to change the policy until we have heard from the review. I absolutely sympathise with the concerns that have been felt across the House, and both the Government and HMRC itself have taken steps to try to mitigate them.

T2. [912473] **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): The former coalfields of England, Scotland and Wales have a combined population of 5.7 million. If they were treated as a single distinct region, that would be the poorest region in the United Kingdom. By any measure or definition, the coalfield communities are left-behind areas, so what fiscal policy steps is the Chancellor taking to address the specific structural and economic weaknesses of former coalfield areas such as mine in going forward with the shared prosperity fund?

Sajid Javid: I share the hon. Gentleman's desire to ensure that all parts of our great country are benefiting from our strong economy. We have seen a jobs boom since 2010, after the deepest recession in our peacetime history under the previous Labour Government. Of the 3.7 million jobs that have been created, 65% are outside London and the south-east, which will be benefiting his communities and so many more.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): One of the ingredients of economic growth—we have talked about boosting small businesses—is improving the productivity within the economy. What are the ministerial team doing to boost productivity?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Mr Simon Clarke): I thank my hon. Friend for his question; he was obviously responsible for this when he was Exchequer Secretary. Last week I met Charlie Mayfield for a very good discussion about the Be the Business fund that the Government have set up to support business-led movement to improve small business productivity. This includes running pilots in Cornwall to support the hospitality sector and in the north-west to support family businesses. There are other schemes, such as Made Smarter, which is a good pilot, in addition to a £31 million package announced at conference 2018 to improve SME management through peer-to-peer networks.

T3. [912474] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): The Cogent Power steel plant in my constituency is threatened with closure by Tata Steel but is the only plant in the UK that, with investment, could be capable of supplying electrical steels for the UK electric vehicle industry. If this Government are serious about building this new industry in the UK, will Ministers work with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to ensure that the plant has a future?

Sajid Javid: I will make certain that the Business Secretary is aware of the hon. Lady's concerns. The Treasury obviously takes an interest in this issue but she will know that the Department for Business is taking the lead on it. Obviously, and rightly, she is concerned about jobs in her constituency. She would welcome the fact, I hope, that because of the policies of this Government more generally since 2010, we have seen in her constituency a 50% fall in the headline unemployment rate.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Ind): As we leave the EU, we need to reinforce our international reputation as a powerhouse of scientific excellence. In 2017 we spent 1.7% of national income on research and development, while Germany spent 3% and Israel 4.3%. So will the Chancellor use his next Budget to make substantial progress towards our 2.4% target and recommit to the medium-term target of 3% of national income going into research and development?

Sajid Javid: First, may I thank my right hon. Friend for his excellent work as Business Secretary, including in this hugely important area of research and development? He set some ambitious targets. We intend to stick to those targets, if not go even further, which I am sure he would welcome. Obviously I will not set out the Budget now, but I absolutely share his ambition, and I think he will be pleased with what we eventually do.

T4. [912476] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, it was 75 jobs at Portastor and jobs have been lost at Nestlé. This morning I heard about the loss of 60 more skilled jobs across my constituency. Week after week, I am hearing of skilled job losses in the constituency. Instead of the Government talking about outplacement schemes, my constituents want their jobs. So how is the Chancellor investing in economies such as York's?

Sajid Javid: We are investing in York and investing throughout the country by creating a dynamic, free enterprise economy that is creating jobs. We have the lowest unemployment rate in our country in 45 years. I would think that a party that calls itself Labour would actually welcome that. In the hon. Lady's own constituency, since 2010—since the Labour Government were kicked out—we have seen a fall of 12,300, or 64%, in the unemployment numbers. That is something she should welcome.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I welcome the introduction of the new business banking resolution service that will start to hear cases of historical problems later this year. In the previous Chancellor's letter of 19 January, he stated that that scheme should carefully consider all cases that come before it. How is that possible when the research of the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking determined that 85% of cases are excluded?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is a powerful advocate for this redress scheme and I thank him for the work that he has done. In our conversation on 10 September, I reiterated the Government's position that the scheme should not reopen complaints that have sometimes gone multiple times through the courts, but I welcome the fact that the new scheme will give access to 99% of those claims going forward, and I will continue to engage with him where I can to provide solutions on individual cases.

T6. [912478] **Sarah Jones** (Croydon Central) (Lab): Westfield and Hammerson are due to build a new shopping centre in my constituency. Westfield has been bought by Unibail-Rodamco, which is a large French developer, and it has concerns about the state of retail and Brexit, obviously. The previous Chancellor had just agreed to meet the chief exec of Unibail-Rodamco. Will the current Chancellor honour that commitment and meet them?

Sajid Javid: I can see that this is an important issue, and I will ensure that a meeting takes place with the appropriate Minister.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), the House will want to know, is a former money and property editor of *The Independent* and a very distinguished fellow, I am sure.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I am sure whatever cachet I had has now been completely ruined; thank you, Mr Speaker. There are reports that the Government

are looking at bringing forward the date of the banning of diesel and petrol cars. Does the Chancellor share my concerns about the fiscal damage of lower new car sales, the lack of electric car infrastructure and the negligible impact that such a virtue-signalling move will have on emissions?

Mr Simon Clarke: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is a tireless champion of the motor industry, which we all take very seriously. The Government have made a commitment to delivering net zero emissions by mid-century; that is hugely important and has cross-party support across the House. We will not be making any precipitate moves that would concern him without proper consultation fully across Government about the ramifications of any change in that date.

T7. [912479] **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): In June, HMRC said that at least 20% of the 10,000 trucks reaching Dover on day one of a no-deal Brexit will not comply with French customs, leading to very long delays and causing shortages of fresh food and medicines. How many non-compliant trucks does HMRC currently project at Dover on day one?

Jesse Norman: I do not have the number to hand, but I would be glad to write to the right hon. Gentleman with it.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I welcome the Chancellor's commitment yesterday of £5 billion to support gigabit broadband across the whole of the United Kingdom. He will be aware that, historically, the Scottish Government have been responsible for the roll-out of superfast broadband, which is way behind what they promised, and not a penny of the £600 million that they announced in 2017 has been spent. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that future broadband funding will be paid directly to local authorities, bypassing the Scottish Government, who have failed rural constituents such as mine more than most?

Sajid Javid: The investment that I announced yesterday is hugely important for the entire country, including Scotland. My hon. Friend is right to point to the abysmal record of the Scottish Government in delivering broadband for their people, so we should certainly look at whether there is a much better way to deliver it.

T8. [912481] **Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): The real wages of working people are lower than they were before the global financial crisis, and while many Tory shires are better off, areas and residents like those in my constituency have been left behind by this Government. Is it not about time that this Government stopped lining the pockets of corporations and Tory shires and invested in people in communities like mine?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Rishi Sunak): This Government passionately believe in helping those at the bottom end of the pay scale, which is why the Chancellor announced yesterday an increase in the national living wage, to abolish low pay in this country once and for all. Our track record over the last few years in this area has been exemplary. The fastest growth in incomes has been for those at the bottom end of the pay scale. Today, someone earning the national living wage

is £3,500 better off than they were when we came into office. This is a Conservative Government on the side of those who are working hard.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I very much welcome the Prime Minister's announcement of pound-for-pound replacement through the shared prosperity fund of the EU funding that Cornwall receives. We are really ready in Cornwall to drive our economy forward. Will the Chancellor meet the local enterprise partnership and all Cornwall's MPs, so that we can make rapid progress in designing that fund?

Mr Simon Clarke: My hon. Friend is right that we need to ensure that the UK shared prosperity fund works for all the regions and nations of our country. I would be delighted to meet her, to ensure that we get all the suggestions from Cornwall as part of the process of designing that new fund.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Can the Minister answer the question asked earlier by the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd): what is the reason for not suspending the loan charge scheme until the inquiry is completed? It is a request not for a change of policy, but just to suspend the scheme.

Jesse Norman: The reason is that the inquiry is designed to test the policy, and the policy remains in place until the inquiry is over. If the policy were ended now or suspended, all that potentially would occur is more confusion if the inquiry took the view that, ultimately, the Government were in the right.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I thank Ministers for providing funding to help evidence and establish the business case for reopening Middleswich railway station—a key priority for my constituents. What wider fiscal steps are they taking to support my constituency by supporting the northern powerhouse and midlands engine?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for working tirelessly on behalf of her constituents to ensure that more infrastructure, including rail and road, is delivered

locally. She will know that one of the first commitments of the new Administration was to Northern Powerhouse Rail and further funding for the midlands engine. She may also know that yesterday I announced a White Paper on further devolution, which I think she will welcome too.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The social security benefits freeze has led many children and families into poverty and destitution. The Chancellor failed to answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), so I ask him again: yes or no, will he lift the social security freeze next year?

Rishi Sunak: Announcements on welfare will of course be for the Budget, but it is important to note that this Government have done the most important job in lifting people out of poverty, which is getting them into work. Today, a million fewer people are living in workless households as a result of the actions taken by this Government.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: So many shining stars in the parliamentary galaxy and so little time. Which star shall shine? Justine Greening.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Ind): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Government seem to be making pre-election spending pledges with all the velocity of a high-power water jet. I wonder whether the Chancellor will point it in the direction of Hammersmith bridge. It has been closed for several months, but even its repair plan would not enable it to take double-decker buses. Will he look at whether his bus pledge can extend to the capital required to enable it to be successful?

Sajid Javid: I know that this is a very important issue for my right hon. Friend and her constituents. I share some of her concerns, which is why it has troubled me that the Mayor of London is not taking this issue seriously. Why is that? He has the funding available if he chooses to deploy it. He can make a difference immediately, but he refuses to do so.

Irish Border: Customs Arrangements

12.41 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union if he will make a statement on the Government's proposals for checks and customs arrangements on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to replace the current backstop.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (James Duddridge): We are committed to finding a solution to the north-south border that protects the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. We can best meet those commitments if we explore solutions other than the backstop. The backstop risks weakening the delicate balance embodied in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, which was grounded in agreement, consent and respect for minorities. Removing control of the commercial and economic life of Northern Ireland to an external body over which the people of Northern Ireland have no control risks undermining that balance. Any deal on Brexit on 31 October must avoid the whole or just part—that is, Northern Ireland—being trapped in an arrangement where it is a rule taker.

The Government intend to set out more detail on our position on an alternative to the backstop in the coming days. In the meantime, I assure the House that under no circumstance will the UK place infrastructure, checks or controls at the border. Both sides have always been clear that the arrangements for the border must recognise the unique circumstance of the island of Ireland and, reflecting that, be creative and flexible.

The Prime Minister's European Union sherpa, David Frost, is leading a cross-Government team in these detailed negotiations with taskforce 50. We have shared in written form a series of confidential technical non-papers, which reflect the ideas the United Kingdom has been putting forward. Those papers are not the Government setting out their formal position. These meetings and our sharing of confidential technical non-papers show that we are serious about getting a deal—one that must involve the removal of the backstop.

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the Minister for his reply, but we are not much the wiser. Today, there are no border posts or checks on goods crossing the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and the backstop is there to ensure that remains the case after Brexit. That is what the joint declaration of December 2017 committed to. The Government's position now, however, is that the reality of Brexit will require customs checks on the island of Ireland. That is the inexorable logic of the Prime Minister's statement this morning that a

"sovereign united country must have a single customs territory."

Whatever proposals have in fact been put to the EU taskforce, the Tánaiste, Simon Coveney, has described them as a "non-starter", an Irish Government spokesman says the taskforce has indicated that the UK's non-papers "fall well short of the agreed aims and objectives of the backstop", and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has told the BBC that

"it's not possible to put anything like a customs facility in Newry, Fermanagh or many other locations away from the border".

I have the following questions to put to the Minister. Are the Government proposing customs clearance sites or zones anywhere in Northern Ireland? Does the Minister understand the risks that any such sites would create for the peace brought by the Good Friday agreement, and have the Government taken legal advice on the compatibility of their proposals with that agreement? Do the Government's proposals comply with section 10(2)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which rules out regulations that

"create or facilitate border arrangements between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland after exit day which feature physical infrastructure, including border posts, or checks and controls, that did not exist before exit day"?

Are the Government proposing to track lorries cleared at any such sites using GPS? How can an alternative to the backstop be built on systems and technology that are not currently in place? Finally, when exactly will the Government share with this House and with the people of Northern Ireland their proposals for a replacement to the backstop? I ask because it is unacceptable for us to be kept in the dark about what is being proposed in our name on such an important matter.

James Duddridge: There were eight or nine questions there, and I will try to cover them all, but if I do not, perhaps we will pick them up in questions. I think it is completely reasonable that the Government can use non-papers to have those technical discussions. The Government are seeking to have a good discussion with the Commission, rather than disguising anything. The previous Government shared more, and actually it led to proposals being rubbished before they were properly worked through. These technical papers are not even our final proposals to the Commission—they are very much working documents—but we will be giving proposals to the Commission shortly.

Clearly, the Government will want to comply with subsection (2)(b). The right hon. Gentleman asked about legal advice. I think he will understand that I am not going to get into whether legal advice has been taken, or what legal advice has been given; for normal reasons, those things are not shared with the House. He asked about the impact of physical checks. There is no intention to have physical checks at the border. I am not choosing my words carefully there; there are no plans to do that, I can reassure him. Perhaps he was thinking about some of the reports in the Northern Ireland press suggesting there might be checks near the border. That is not the intention. Those reports simply are incorrect. The right hon. Gentleman also referred to GPS and technology. I am afraid I cannot get into the detail of the proposals at that level now, because they are subject to ongoing negotiations and discussions at the Commission.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): In his discussions with businesses, is the Minister finding the same as I am, which is that the real challenge businesses are facing is the prolonged uncertainty of kicking the can down the road? Of course, all businesses would rather leave with a deal, but when faced with the choice of leaving at the end of October with no deal or prolonging the agony for many months to come, businesses simply want this done and for us to leave at the end of October.

James Duddridge: I thank my hon. Friend for that, and he makes a very good point. The British public do want us to get on with this, and the best way we can get

[James Duddridge]

a deal is continuing serious discussions, through use of these technical papers, with the EU and coming forward with more concrete proposals shortly.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Let us return to the question of the Irish border, because it matters. The Good Friday agreement was a guarantor that we had moved beyond the period of conflict. What we are risking now is not only a dangerous time in the history of this country, but our relationships across the island of Ireland and the world. We are 70 days into the premiership of Prime Minister Johnson and there are 30 days until the Brexit date. It is now time that the House had clarity from this Minister or from other Ministers about what the Government intend to do to deliver on the Irish border.

Everybody in the House knows that the backstop was there to guarantee that there would be no hard border across the island of Ireland. That is fundamental to delivering on the Good Friday agreement. We all know that while the European Union has said that it is prepared to negotiate around the words of the backstop, it is not prepared to compromise on the spirit of it—that Northern Ireland should be part of the customs union and the single market regulatory standards of the European Union. When the Prime Minister says that “the reality” of Brexit is that there will need to be customs checks on the island of Ireland, it is in stark contrast to the words of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland this morning that there would be no checks five or 10 miles into Ireland. That would be in breach of the joint declaration of 2017, and importantly, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) pointed out, would be in breach of section 10 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which made it clear that any arrangements for Northern Ireland after exit day that featured border posts or customs controls would not be acceptable.

The Minister has to come clean to the House about what the future holds for us. The Good Friday agreement is far too important for us to put it at risk by fooling around. If this were just farce, we might all laugh at the high-wire tricks of the Prime Minister, but this is dangerous. It puts the Good Friday agreement and its hard-won gains in jeopardy. It is not just Northern Ireland and Ireland that deserve better, as the Irish Foreign Minister said, but this House and the whole country. The Minister has got to do better.

James Duddridge: I agree with the hon. Gentleman: the Good Friday/ Belfast agreement is essential. Where we differ is on where we feel conflicts may be brought about on that agreement. He feels they will be brought about by removing the backstop; I think there is a greater risk of leaving the backstop there and ending up in a situation in which Northern Ireland is part of the customs union in perpetuity and takes a different direction. I think that is the greater risk, and I remind him that the alternative arrangements are not a solution to the backstop. The alternative arrangements would always have to be there. What we are doing is putting a date on when we will get that sorted out, rather than leaving an indefinite period.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Ind): The country is facing no deal precisely because the Government have not published a Brexit plan, yet. The key protagonists who

sold Britain Brexit are now in charge, and all we are asking is for them to get on with it and tell us what the plan is to deliver what they promised. Back in April 2016, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—now Secretary of State for the Environment—said:

“There is no reason why we have to change the border arrangements in the event of a Brexit”.

Clearly, what is being discussed now is something very different from what voters were told during the referendum campaign. The House is simply asking what the plan is to deliver what was promised. I do not understand why the Government will not just get on with it and tell us what their plan is.

James Duddridge: The Government are actively getting on with it, and that is what the negotiations are about. I would gently say that revealing the detail of our negotiating position—the technical papers and emerging proposals—would actually deliver what the right hon. Lady and I do not want. We do not want no deal: we want a deal—

Justine Greening: You’ve given it to them!

James Duddridge: To be clear, we have given technical non-papers. We will give the proposal to the Commission shortly.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The future of peace and normality on the island of Ireland will critically depend on the actions of the Prime Minister over the next few weeks, and I for one am deeply concerned that he shows every sign of not understanding or not caring, or both, about the potential implications of the course that he is following.

What discussions have the Government had with the Government of our co-guarantors of the peace process, the Government of Ireland, before lodging this non-plan? What discussions did the Government have with the political parties that represent a significant majority opinion in Northern Ireland before lodging this non-plan? Is the Minister even mildly concerned that the director of the CBI in Northern Ireland has said that the proposals suggest that the

“U.K. govt doesn’t take NI’s economy or peace process seriously”?

Does that comment cause any concern to the Government?

Through various Ministers at the Dispatch Box, the Government have sworn blind that they are negotiating hard for a better deal, but the Minister let the cat out of the bag—there is not even a detailed proposal on which to negotiate. Will the Government now own up to the fact that there is no detailed proposal, there have been no proper negotiations and the Government’s strategy is to look for a no-deal Brexit while blaming everyone but themselves for the problem?

Will the Minister unequivocally repeat the comments of the previous Prime Minister that there will be no customs controls at the border or anywhere else, as required by the Good Friday agreement? Given that this Prime Minister has unilaterally reneged on a promise that he personally signed up to as Foreign Secretary in December 2017, is it any wonder that this side of the House, the other side—increasingly—and an increasing number of Governments in the European Union are coming to the conclusion that he simply cannot be trusted?

James Duddridge: Northern Ireland is key to the Government and the Prime Minister. In fact, it is the principal discussion point with the Commission. The Prime Minister has said that we want to get rid of the backstop and this is “the most important thing”. Far from Northern Ireland being on the side as part of the negotiations, it is at the centre of them.

The hon. Gentleman asks about discussions: clearly, extensive discussions have been had with the Irish Government and other entities in Northern Ireland. He says that I have let the cat out of the bag by saying there are no proposals: there are technical papers in the non-papers, and the final proposal will come shortly. It is very much actively being discussed with the Commission on a daily basis. He asked me to confirm on behalf of the Government that there will be no customs control at the border, and I am happy to say that that remains unchanged.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that it is the Government’s position that they want to leave with a deal if possible? Will he also confirm that should the European Commission and European leaders decide not to accept the proposals, the Government will leave with no deal? My constituents voted 63% to leave. They have been waiting three years for Brexit. Will the Minister tell the Prime Minister that they are behind him and to make sure that we get on and deliver Brexit on 31 October?

James Duddridge: I thank my hon. Friend and his constituents who overwhelmingly supported Brexit. I can confirm that plan A is to get a deal, and that is what we are working towards and why there is so much focus on the proposal that will come shortly. It makes no sense to share the detail of the negotiation with the House if it makes getting a deal done less likely. Collectively, the House wants a deal and the strategy that we are taking forward makes it more likely that we get a deal while being fully prepared for no deal.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): As a Member who lives in the non-customs zone that has not been discussed, and given that we will, I hope, get definitive proposals in the next few days, can the Minister at least draw a little comfort among the negativity that has pervaded the EU that they are no longer talking about no reopening of the withdrawal agreement, that it is sacrosanct and there is no possibility of ever going back to it? At least now there is a glimmer of light.

James Duddridge: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question because it gives me the opportunity to say how things have changed. There was a time when Michel Barnier was saying, “No more negotiations”, and that he did not have a mandate to negotiate on issues that are important in Northern Ireland and across the United Kingdom. Now the Prime Minister’s sherpa is regularly in Brussels and there are regular discussions at prime ministerial level and between the Secretary of State and Michel Barnier.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): Many people speak on behalf of the communities affected in Northern Ireland, but what have the Government done to speak

directly to those communities on what ideas they have for alternative arrangements that would be acceptable to them?

James Duddridge: Specifically on alternative arrangements, there is an architecture that supports these discussions. There is a technical-level group, which is chaired by the Secretary of State, and which includes industry experts, and there is also a business consultative group working towards alternative arrangements under a deal that will come after exit day.

Tony Lloyd: You don’t believe that.

James Duddridge: The hon. Gentleman says he does not believe it. I chaired the group last time, along with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. There is constructive agreement and frank discussion within that group, and that happens outside the consultative group forum as well—I have set up several bilateral meetings with businesses since.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Section 10(2)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, on the Irish border, says there can be no hard border that undermines the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which enacted the Good Friday agreement. It also makes illegal an agreement that creates or facilitates border arrangements between Northern Ireland and the Republic that feature physical infrastructure that was not there before. Can the Minister explain how on earth what we learned overnight is compatible with the law?

James Duddridge: I am unclear what the hon. Lady means by “what we learned overnight”. If she means the press report on RTE in Ireland, I can tell her that it simply is not true. I can categorically say to her that there are no plans and never have been any plans for any physical checks. This is not a right to reply, but I will be more than happy to take that up with her in more detail, in relation to the Act and more generally, particularly when everything else has come out in the wash.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): Does the Minister agree that this whole Northern Ireland-Republic border issue is confected nonsense designed to derail Brexit? Has he considered the Jameson lorry that goes from the south to the north and the Bushmills lorry that goes from the north to the south—different currencies, different excise duties and different tax rates? These are trusted traders. They are trusted now and will be in the future. Does he consider that the current VAT system of Intrastat returns and quarterly accounting could form the basis upon which a proper border arrangement can be easily made?

James Duddridge: There are different people in this Chamber: some have a legitimate desire for Brexit not to happen; equally, some Members have genuine concerns and recognise the legitimate decision of the general public and the need to get on with Brexit. It is unhelpful to conflate the two. My hon. Friend refers to a specific solution. There are many solutions being considered that were in the non-papers, but I do not want to comment on those until the proposal is formally made to the Commission.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On the “Today” programme this morning, the Prime Minister said that he would like to “veil” the Government’s proposals on the Irish border in “decent obscurity”? Can the Minister explain how individuals and businesses are supposed to prepare for Brexit if it is veiled in decent obscurity? For clarification, could he say how much he expects these proposals will cost small and medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland and how many of those businesses he expects to fail as a result of the Government’s proposals? Will he finally admit that there is no version of Brexit that works for Northern Ireland?

James Duddridge: The point of the business consultative group that met in Belfast a few weeks ago was to share ideas in confidence so that the UK Government could develop their position and feed that into the consultative papers, so there is structurally a process in place to involve businesses. Under the terms of reference, that is purely to look at deal relationships. In many ways, deal and no deal could be similar in terms of the crossover of systems that could be used, but those discussions are very much ongoing.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Given that we cannot know what is needed to make the Irish border work until we have sketched the outline of our future relationship, and regardless of the shortcomings of the backstop, is not this fixation on trying to find an alternative permanent solution to the border now a complete waste of time, energy, money and, ultimately, political capital?

James Duddridge: We need to find a solution to the border issue, and the original withdrawal agreement gives us extra time beyond exit date to do so. We are trying to bring forward those issues, work on them closely now and get more of the work done before a deal and exit day in order to avoid ending up in a long-term and complicated situation that causes problems in Northern Ireland, for the integrity of the UK and for our relationship with the EU.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I want to take the Minister back to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) about the Government’s obligations to obey the law and abide by legislation passed by the House. Section 10 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 says that Ministers must

“have due regard to the joint report from the negotiators...during phase 1”—

in December 2017—and that nothing in the Act

“authorises regulations which...create or facilitate border arrangements...which feature physical infrastructure, including border posts, or checks and controls, that did not exist before exit day”.

He has told us to discount reports from RTÉ overnight that suggest that the Government were planning infrastructure a few miles from the border. Would he regard such physical infrastructure a few miles back from the border as incompatible with the legislation this House has passed?

James Duddridge: I am tempted to give a simple answer to a straight question, but, because it relies on detail, I will write to the right hon. Gentleman and

confirm what I think is the bleeding obvious. Given what he says, it seems to me that there is an obvious answer—[HON. MEMBERS: “Give it!”] I have said I will give him a good answer and make sure it is proper in relation to that Act.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The British Government are not going to build a hard border in Northern Ireland, the Irish Government say they will not allow a hard border in Northern Ireland, and the EU cannot build a hard border in Northern Ireland, so who is going to build this hard border?

James Duddridge: My hon. Friend eloquently makes a point. We have said that we will not put a border in place, the Irish do not want to put a border in place, and the EU do not want to put one in place along the north-south line.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland told BBC Radio Ulster this morning:

“I’m clear that we can’t have customs facilities in the places mentioned in the reports”

overnight, but Parliament needs to know; we need clarity. The people deserve to know what the Government’s plans are. Can the Minister tell us who is speaking for the Government on these matters—the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State?

James Duddridge: Both.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Will my hon. Friend, with his customary good grace, take this opportunity at the Dispatch Box to confirm the seriousness with which the Government are seeking to respect the Good Friday agreement, in contrast to the unworthy characterisation by the Labour Front Bench that this is part of some great big game? Secondly, can he alert the House to whether there are existing procedures in the north and south of Ireland by which companies import and export to countries outside the EU using existing customs clearances and checks?

James Duddridge: The answer to the second part of my right hon. Friend’s question is that there are established systems that can also be used.

The issue of Northern Ireland is incredibly important. It is central to the delivery of a deal on Brexit. One of the first things that I asked to be able to do was visit the border. It is sometimes difficult to get down to the border: there is a certain resistance to allowing Ministers out of Whitehall, or, if they do get into Northern Ireland, allowing them out of Belfast. However, I went down to Newry and insisted—although I think that some people were not too keen—on visiting the border and criss-crossing and talking to people about the issues. I think that that is the responsible thing to do, to understand the problems at least broadly, so that we can develop solutions as much as possible.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): A significant proportion of the exports of the Northern Ireland food industry, particularly ready meals, goes through the Republic, through Holyhead and then on to the UK home market. What assessment has the Minister made of the effects of

Government policy on the border—whatever that is—on the viability of the Northern Ireland food trade, on the supply for the home market, and, critically for me, on the economic prospects of Holyhead?

James Duddridge: We are prioritising free flow across the border rather than customs revenue in the case of no deal, but we want as much free flow as possible in either scenario. There is detailed thinking on the ports at a thematic level, and also specific thinking port by port.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): As the Minister will know, in a deal or a no-deal Brexit, the use of the transit convention will mean that there will be no need for any infrastructure checks or controls at the Dover border. Could that not be applied to Northern Ireland as well? May I also ask whether the Minister agrees that all that the House really needs to know is what discussions Members of the House who are not members of the Government have been having with the European Union?

James Duddridge: I thank my hon. Friend for all his work on the short straits. I understand that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has visited both the Dover and the Calais sites, and I thank my hon. Friend for the support that he has been giving to the Cabinet Office, particularly in looking at no deal. I think that Dover was ahead of the game; other ports can learn from that, and have indeed done so, as has the Department.

As for my hon. Friend's second question, I do not really want to get into the weeds when it comes to how people took advice on other Bills in the House. I will limit myself to the nature of the question asked by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Does the Minister accept that any new infrastructure or surveillance at or near the border carries serious risks? The Northern Ireland journalist Dearbhail McDonald has said:

"It's hard to explain to those who have not lived through a conflict that claimed more than 3,500 lives, in a region with a smaller population than most large UK cities, how the border permeated every aspect of our lives."

Should the Government spend a bit more time talking to those communities?

James Duddridge: As I have said, I went to the border. It does not take long to feel the pain, the fear and the uncertainty. That is part of daily life, separate from Brexit in many ways, and I take it incredibly seriously. I discussed it while I was there, and reflected on it throughout the day and subsequently.

May I add, on a more light-hearted note, that the hon. Lady has still not taken me up on the kind offer that I made when responding to my last urgent question? I look forward to having a cup of tea with her.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): During my time in the Cabinet Office, some colleagues and I produced a paper based on customs collaboration, which meant using existing ports and airports and enabling EU and UK customs officials to work together in undertaking checks to ensure that there was no border infrastructure. It also involved leveraging existing

VAT and cross-border accounting systems, again to ensure that there was no requirement for a border. Can my hon. Friend give us any more details of the current proposals, and tell us whether they run along similar lines?

James Duddridge: I thank the hon. Gentleman for all the work that he is doing. There are themes in which I have seen him very much engaged. I am not sure that I have seen the specific paper that he has mentioned, but I would welcome a briefing from him—with officials—so that it can be fed into the Government's thinking.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Ministers regularly refer to their commitment to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. Even the Prime Minister trots out the words that he is "committed to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement", but I wonder whether he has any idea of what that actually means. It means the Prime Minister standing up and defending the agreement, not only in his words but in his actions. Will the Minister take the opportunity to rule out the suggestion, contained in a UK Government document, that there will be a string of border posts, not at the border but some miles from it? That would represent a physical infrastructure, which this Government must know is contrary to both the spirit and the letter of the Good Friday agreement. Will the Minister accept and confirm that?

James Duddridge: Obviously I recognise the importance of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. As for the specific terminology "a string of border posts" being in a Government document, I have certainly not seen it. I can say to the hon. Lady that I do not think it is in any Government documents, and that I can refute the contents of the RTE article. If she wants to pick out bits of the article, or any document that she thinks it refers to, I shall be more than happy to look at them, but that is not Government policy, that is not what we are doing, that is not the intent, and as far as I am aware, the report is incorrect.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Given that 95% of cross-border trade on the island of Ireland is engaged in by trusted traders who want to comply with whatever the new arrangements will be, and given that the Republic of Ireland's own no-deal planning assumes controls away from the border even at the point of destination, what is the problem?

James Duddridge: It is a complex situation, but one to which we think we can find an answer. A category of "trusted traders" is certainly something that any competent Government would be looking into, but I do not want to go into the details of the proposals, for reasons that I have already given.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Let us try again. Can the Minister simply confirm that any new physical checks or infrastructure, whether at the border or away from it, would be illegal under the Good Friday agreement and the withdrawal Act passed by the House last year?

James Duddridge: I think I have already answered that question in part. I have agreed to write in response to the part that I have not answered, and I will copy the right hon. Gentleman into my response.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Ind): Does my hon. Friend agree that at this stage of the negotiations, it is not unreasonable to be able to share proposals before they are definitive and to be able to probe a response, and does he agree that the best course—before we reach the stage at which a formal submission is made—is for the confidentiality on both sides to be reflected, to provide the maximum space for the progress that is required?

James Duddridge: I recognise that as a potential way forward. I think it would limit the Government's negotiating capacity, and there will clearly be opportunities for the House to interact in that way at some point in the future, but I will reflect on my right hon. Friend's comments and discuss them with the Secretary of State.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (LD): The House is being asked to take it on trust that the Government have credible proposals for alternatives to the backstop, so let me put the Minister to the test in a slightly different way. Is he confident that this border that is not going to be a border will be fully developed and ready for operation, and in compliance with the Good Friday agreement, at one minute past midnight on Friday 1 November 2019?

James Duddridge: That is certainly our intention. While on my feet, may I take the opportunity to say that I think I misheard the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) and may have answered the question that I thought he asked rather than the question he actually asked? I apologise. I will look at *Hansard* and get back to him properly.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Anyone with any business experience knows that complex and sensitive negotiations are not best conducted in public or with the input of those who may want an entirely different outcome to the purpose of those negotiations. Anyone claiming otherwise is in my view motivated by a desire to undermine Brexit rather than a desire for greater detail.

James Duddridge: I know it to be true because, before my hon. Friend came to this House, I had to negotiate the cost of my printing requirements at elections, and I know that he is a very canny negotiator who knows all the tricks. I listen to him carefully when he says what happens in business negotiations. I have great respect for his position.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I think that the Minister is seeking to assure us that there will not be any customs posts, checks or controls anywhere at or near the border.

James Duddridge *indicated assent.*

Stephen Timms: But the Prime Minister has said this morning that Irish customs checks will be the reality after Brexit. So where will the checks envisaged by the Prime Minister take place?

James Duddridge: The right hon. Gentleman is right in his first statement. I am entirely trying to reassure the House on behalf of the Government of the first point. I

had the pleasure while getting changed this morning of listening to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on Radio 4. I did not have the pleasure of tuning into Radio Ulster, but I will hot foot my way back to the Department and ask for a transcript of what I presume the right hon. Gentleman is referring to.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Is it not the case that whatever is put forward as the solution to the Irish border will not be sufficient for some in this Chamber; it will not be good enough for those who want to revoke and remain; and it will not be good enough for those who want more dither and delay? May I urge my hon. Friend to press on with his determination and with his clarity and to ensure that, come what may, we leave on 31 October?

James Duddridge: I thank my hon. Friend for that supportive comment. We are resolved. We will press on. We will try to get a deal. That is our preference, and we will do so and leave on 31 October.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Governments are notorious for getting IT projects wrong in terms of both cost and time for implementation. Can the Minister confirm that one of these non-papers states that this mythical off-the-shelf technological solution that could be implemented in the event of a no-deal will be able to be adapted to any future arrangements and will answer the question posed by Michel Barnier about how a virtual solution can check cows?

James Duddridge: As tempting as it is, I have been clear that I will not get into the detail of those proposals or non-papers.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): May I remind everybody that this Government are creating a new customs border because they want to leave the European customs union and they do not want to accept the backstop. Customs checks are primarily there not for loads that are compliant and have the right documentation, but for goods that enter a country illegally. How do the Government intend to deal with non-compliant cargo and stop widespread illegal activity?

James Duddridge: That is clearly a very important issue. It is one of the issues that I looked at when I was on the border.

I am not sure that I used exactly the right words in the House. I should have said that the Government will never put in place infrastructure checks or controls at the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. Just to be very clear, that is what I meant to say.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Has the Minister read the non-papers? If he has not, how can he say what is or is not in the non-papers?

James Duddridge: First, I have not said what is or is not in the non-papers. As a Minister, I see all the papers I need to see. I am not going to list papers that I have seen, papers that I have read, papers that I have had input into, drafts or versions. I am not going to get into that.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Despite the fact that border checks or infrastructure are not mentioned in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, this Government have committed to avoiding a hard border, which this party agrees with. The Minister will be aware of the surprise and dismay among many in Northern Ireland at this leaked RTÉ proposal. What engagement does the Minister intend to undertake with businesses, which are particularly impacted by this? Will he repeat to them what he has said here today—that this is not Government policy, and nor will it ever be Government policy, because such a proposal would for many constitute a hard border?

James Duddridge: I thank the hon. Lady. It is important that, as well as my saying it, Government communications rebut the inaccuracy. I will make sure that that happens rapidly and in the right forums across Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. I thank her for that. I will do that. It is not something I was immediately going to do, having said it in the House, but it is certainly something I should do, and it is a helpful suggestion.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Can we just be clear here? The Minister said earlier that there would be no customs checks at the border, which obviously suggests that they will be done elsewhere, yet he suggests that what RTÉ is reporting is untrue. He has now just had to correct himself. The Prime Minister said that there would be customs checks in Ireland. So who are we to believe in this process? None of those things are compatible and none of them appear to be compatible with section 10(2)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, let alone the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.

James Duddridge: To clarify, the Government have no plans to put in those checks. We clearly cannot compel the Irish Government to do or not do anything.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): There has been much talk of a 10-mile buffer zone on the border. Can the Minister outline the stage that discussions are at as they pertain to where the Republic of Ireland intends to carry out its checks and in what form? The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has said clearly that it will not put up any border controls at all, so how ironic is it that, in the event of a no deal, it will be the Republic of Ireland and the Taoiseach that will have to erect and man hard border controls?

James Duddridge: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his continued support and thoughts on this issue. He and other colleagues feeding into the process have added great value, and I hope that we will continue those discussions as we move through the process, as the Commission are given proposals and the House debates these issues more fully.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I crossed the border several times this weekend, and what was remarkable about the crossing was that it was utterly unremarkable. So it should remain. To me, there are three options available to us. There is a border in the Irish Sea; there is a hard border on the island of Ireland—which of course puts at jeopardy the Good

Friday agreement—or we all remain in the customs union. The Minister has said that remaining in the customs union is a greater risk than jeopardising the peace brought about by the Good Friday agreement. Can he explain why?

James Duddridge: Unlike the hon. Lady, I do not want to put a border in Northern Ireland or in Scotland. I believe full-heartedly in the Union. It creates a risk in terms of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement because it puts Northern Ireland into a different position if alternative arrangements are not dealt with, and that is unacceptable. The Government believe that that would cause problems in relation to the Good Friday agreement.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that the Good Friday agreement provides for a referendum for the people of Northern and southern Ireland on reunification if they so want. He will also know that 58% of the people in Northern Ireland voted to remain. Given that we have this problem with an open border with open migration, and with a closed border in breach of the Good Friday agreement, would it not be best for the Prime Minister to come forward with his agreement, which I assume will be the backstop within Ireland itself, and put it to the people in a public vote so that we can get Brexit done by finding once and for all whether we want this Brexit mess or not—as opposed to his divided kingdom?

James Duddridge: The hon. Gentleman accused me of dividing the kingdom, but he asked specifically in the same sentence for a vote on parting the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom, as one—the Union—has voted, and it voted for Brexit. That is what we are going to deliver.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): In order to make a proposed border solution work, there will have to be an element of Northern Ireland Executive control over the implementation of any putative agreement. With no extant Northern Ireland Executive, the only solution for that would be imposition on the people of Northern Ireland through direct rule. One does not seek to address democratic issues on one part of these islands by taking democracy away from another, so will the Minister tell the House what his Government are doing to address this democratic outrage?

James Duddridge: We are trying to get Stormont back up and working.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Minister said there would be no hard infrastructure at the Irish border. Does the term “hard infrastructure” include cameras?

James Duddridge: I do not want to get into the detail of the actual proposal, but I will say that while there are not cameras across the whole of the border, there are cameras on parts of the border. However, the hon. Gentleman should not infer anything from that; I do not want to get dragged into the detail, but clearly it would have been one of the options that were looked at.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (LD): Will the Minister accept that customs clearance sites would involve physical infrastructure, and that it would not matter whether they were at the border or some miles distant from it?

James Duddridge: I have been very clear that there will be no infrastructure on the border. I have also been clear that the proposals are currently under negotiation, and I will not go into the detail of those proposals in the House.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): The Irish Government stated last night that these non-papers are a non-starter. With just 30 days to go until exit day, when does the Minister propose to put forward credible proposals that can be negotiated with the EU?

James Duddridge: The Prime Minister has been very clear: that will happen before this weekend.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Over the last 15 minutes, the Minister has been at pains to stress the distinction between technical non-papers and final papers which are forthcoming. On the basis of that distinction, may I therefore ask him a simple question: without going into the detail, can he give the House an assurance that any final proposals that relate to the Irish border will not row back in any way from any of the solemn commitments signed up to in December 2017 in the joint report between the UK and the EU?

James Duddridge: First, may I thank the hon. Gentleman genuinely for his service on the Front Bench? When I took over this role, my predecessor said how much he respected the full team, and now that he is on the Back Benches, perhaps we can have a fuller and more honest discussion than we might have had when we were both Front Benchers.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has said that there will be checks, so whether at a border or a non-border, that does create a border. Whether in a non-paper or a paper, the reality is that there will be checks if the leader of our country has said so. However, the European Commission has said that it has not received any proposals from the UK that meet all the objectives of the backstop, as we have been reiterating and demanding. When will the EU see these proposals?

James Duddridge: Before the weekend.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): So far, we have had nonsense and non-answers on these non-papers, so can we have a clear answer on this question? Can the Minister rule out direct rule being imposed to implement any of these alternative arrangements on the border?

James Duddridge: Is the hon. Gentleman asking whether the Minister will rule out imposing direct rule?

Gavin Newlands: Temporarily, for the border arrangements.

James Duddridge: That is not the Government's plan. The Government's plan is to get Stormont going.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank the Minister for acknowledging that the Belfast agreement is not a one-dimensional document—that it is concerned not solely with north-south relations, but with east-west relations as well. Given the noises that we have heard from Dublin last night and this morning, will he reflect on the comments made by Shane Ross, the Irish Transport Minister, in the summer, who talked of border checks and customs checks in the Irish Republic until he was told that it was politically inconvenient to talk about that, or even those made by the European Commission, which at the start of September recognised, and spelt out very clearly, that it would require customs checks on the Irish side?

James Duddridge: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question because it gives me the opportunity to note how much work has already been done. That which was unacceptable and unresolvable, we are now discussing actively and moving forward on. We are at a snapshot between now and next Friday, with those proposals being delivered to the Commission. So we really are moving forward.

It was always going to be the case that some of the negotiations happened nearer the end of the time limit, but progress has been made consistently, from what was quite an entrenched position, which was particularly disappointing given the sensitivities around Ireland and Northern Ireland and the border and the Good Friday agreement. It would have been nice to have done this in a slightly more deliberative way, and earlier; but we are trying to set up the negotiations in such a way that we will get the best possible result for the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, and that is getting a deal.

Deaths of Homeless People

1.36 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to make a statement on his Government's action to prevent the deaths of people who are homeless.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Luke Hall): Every single death on our streets is a tragedy. Today's statistics have provided us all with a stark reminder that there is so much more to be done. Every death on our streets is one too many, and this Government will work tirelessly to ensure that lives are not needlessly cut short. The fact that 726 people—mothers, fathers, siblings, all somebody's loved one—died while homeless in 2018 will concern not just every Member of this House, but everybody up and down our country.

As you know, Mr Speaker, this Government are committed to putting an end to rough sleeping by 2027 and halving it by 2022; and we have changed the law to help make that happen. In April 2018, the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017—one of the most ambitious pieces of legislation in this area for decades—came into force. We now have a year's worth of evidence, which is showing that more people are being supported earlier, and this is having a clear impact on the prevention of homelessness.

The Government last year published the first rough sleeping strategy, underpinned by £1.2 billion of funding, which laid out how we will work towards ending rough sleeping for good. Indeed, last year we saw a small change—a reduction in rough sleeping. A key element of that was the rough sleeping initiative. A total of £76 million has been invested in over 200 areas. This year, that initiative will fund 750 additional staff and approximately 2,600 new bed spaces. We know that next year, we must go further. Today's statistics demonstrate that. We will be providing a further £422 million to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. That is a £54 million increase in funding on the previous year—a real-terms increase of 13%.

The cold weather is a particularly difficult time for those sleeping rough, so the Government have launched a second year of the cold weather fund. We are making available £10 million to local authorities to support rough sleepers off the streets. That will build on last year's fund, which helped relieve more than 7,000 individuals from rough sleeping over the winter.

These statistics have reminded us starkly of the fateful impact of substance and alcohol misuse. We know that the use of new psychoactive substances is rising. These are dangerous drugs with unpredictable effects, and that is why it is so important that people get the support that they need. In 2019, we brought forward new training for frontline staff to help them engage with and support rough sleepers under the influence of such substances. We are working with the Home Office to ensure that rough sleepers are considered in the forthcoming alcohol strategy, which will focus on vulnerable people.

There is so much more to be done. Our work is continuing, our funding is increasing, our determination is unfaltering and we are committed to making rough sleeping a thing of the past.

John Healey: Seven hundred and twenty-six people died homeless last year. Wherever we sit in this House, wherever we live in this country, that shames us all in a nation as decent and well-off as Britain today. Every one—in shop doorway, in bedsit, on park bench—has been known and loved as someone's son or daughter, friend or colleague. We have heard from the new Minister today, but this demands a response from the Prime Minister himself, tomorrow, in his party conference speech. It demands that he leads a new national mission to end rough sleeping and the rising level of homeless deaths.

The official statistics released today confirm a record high total and a record high increase—up by a fifth over the past year alone. This record high has been 10 years in the making: investment in new social housing has been slashed; housing benefit has been cut 13 times; 9,000 homeless hostel places and beds have been lost as a result of Government funding cuts; and Ministers have refused to step in and protect private renters. There is the widest possible agreement, from homeless charities to the National Audit Office and the cross-party Select Committees of this House, that Government policy has helped cause the rise in homelessness every year since 2010.

Will the Minister therefore acknowledge that high levels of homeless deaths and homelessness are not inevitable? Will he accept that, just as decisions by Ministers have driven the rise in rough sleeping, Government action now could bring it down? Will he back Labour's plans for £100 million for cold weather shelter and support to get people off the streets in every area, starting this winter? Will he tackle the root causes of this shocking rise in deaths with more funding for homelessness services, more low-cost homes and no further cuts in benefits?

These high and rising homeless deaths shame us all, but they shame Government Ministers most. This can and must change.

Luke Hall: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his questions. There is no shying away from the statistics, which are heartbreaking. He is absolutely right that every person who has died on our streets is somebody's brother, mother or sister. He will find no complacency in this Government. We are increasing funding next year by £54 million, which is a 13% real-terms increase. It is important to note that in the areas where we piloted the rough sleeping initiative we saw a direct fall of 19% in rough sleeping in the first year. Next year we are delivering 750 more staff and 2,600 more bed spaces.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise these issues. While visiting homeless hostels and shelters across the country over the past few weeks, I have been struck by the welfare issues that people have raised with me, especially those with complex and difficult needs, and by the complexity of navigating the system in order to get the right support. That is why we have designed a number of safeguards, including individualised support from Department for Work and Pensions frontline staff. It is important to note that we have also allocated £40 million next year for discretionary housing payments. There is a huge amount more to be done on affordable social housing. He is right to highlight the importance of the issue, which has been raised with me by homelessness charities time and again. We have made £9 billion available through the affordable homes programme, to deliver 250,000 new affordable homes.

[*Luke Hall*]

The right hon. Gentleman is also right to raise the role of health services. We see in today's statistics the impact of the high prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse. That is why the support that we are putting forward as part of the rough sleeping strategy, including £2 million to test community-based health models to help rough sleepers access services, including mental health and substance abuse support, is vital. I look forward to working with him, and indeed with every Member of the House, as we try to tackle this hugely challenging issue for our country.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Ind): The number of rough sleepers in Newbury has dropped from the mid-30s to nine as of last week. That is nine too many, but that drop has been achieved by an enormous effort from local community groups, but also by statutory bodies such as West Berkshire Council using Government money, for example from Housing First and Making Every Adult Matter, to really bring down the numbers. The Minister will know that dealing with the hardest to reach—that is really what we are talking about in this urgent question—is about trying to get them the medical attention they need. Will he make every effort to work with his colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that GP surgeries and other health bodies are as open as possible to receiving rough sleepers and ensure that they are directed to where their serious problems can best be dealt with?

Luke Hall: Absolutely, and I thank my right hon. Friend for raising these important matters. I pay tribute to the local organisations and voluntary bodies in his community that are working so hard to support homeless people and rough sleepers. Housing is part of the solution, but he is quite right to highlight that health services have a hugely significant role to play, alongside other public services. It is right to highlight the £30 million that NHS England is providing for rough sleeping over the next five years, specifically to tackle some of the high instances we have seen in today's statistics. He is absolutely right and we will continue to make that money available.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Every death of a homeless person is a preventable tragedy. Although housing is a devolved matter, in many ways the policies that are causing those deaths are reserved to Westminster. *The Guardian* reports that drug-related deaths in England and Wales have gone up by 55% since 2017, and that is directly related to failing Home Office policy. In Glasgow we are facing the twin risks of so-called street Valium flooding the city and an ageing population of intravenous drug users. They run the risk of being put out of their accommodation for drug use and are extremely vulnerable. Will the Minister ask his Home Office colleagues to lay the statutory instrument that would amend the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 to allow drug consumption rooms, as they have in countries around the world, including the incredibly successful Quai 9 in Geneva, which I visited recently?

People are also being plunged into debt and eviction due to universal credit, so will the Minister end the five-week wait, which makes it so hard for people to get out of that cycle and get their lives back on track? Will he also look at amending advance payments, because

this only keeps people in debt for longer, rather than resolving the issues? Will he work with the Scottish Government, whose “Ending Homelessness Together” action plan is helping to ensure that those facing homelessness are supported into a permanent settled home and that their needs are met as quickly as possible? Will he look across Government, as I have asked, particularly to the DWP and the Home Office, and ask his colleagues to take action now on the issues that are causing the deaths of so many homeless people in England and Wales and also in Scotland?

Luke Hall: The hon. Lady started by stating that every death of a homeless person is preventable, and I absolutely agree. There is so much more that we can do. She talked specifically about the importance of cross-departmental working, both with the Home Office and the Department of Health and Social Care, and I completely agree. We are continuing to work with colleagues in those Departments on the forthcoming independent review of drugs policy, led by the hugely respected Dame Carol Black. We will study her findings extremely carefully. The hon. Lady also talked about universal credit. It is important to put on the record that housing benefit will remain outside universal credit for all supported housing, including homeless shelters, until 2023. She raised a number of extremely important issues, and of course I am happy to work with her colleagues in the Scottish Government and to meet her to discuss how we can take these issues forward.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Fundamentally, we will deal with this only by providing many more truly affordable homes of secure tenure. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should consider changing the rules that currently require us to get the best price for public land, and that really we should make that land available to provide many more ultra low-cost homes?

Luke Hall: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He is an expert in the field and I take what he says extremely seriously, along with all the recommendations of the Communities and Local Government Committee, of which he is a member. I look forward to meeting him to discuss his proposal in more detail.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his new post. Does he accept that two of the main drivers of the increase in homelessness are the shortage of social housing and the impact of the Government's welfare policies? On housing, he said that the Government are making money available for affordable homes, but does he not accept that the Government's definition of affordable homes, at 80% of market rates, means that they are simply unaffordable for most homeless people? On welfare, has he read the National Audit Office's report, which draws a direct link between welfare policies and the rise in homelessness? Will he now accept that there is a need for a review of that link and then for a commitment to change the welfare policies to ensure that they do not drive homelessness up even further?

Luke Hall: I thank the Chairman of the Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government for his questions, and I look forward to working constructively with him in the weeks and months ahead.

I would note that we have raised borrowing caps for local authorities so that they can borrow to build, and I say again that we are putting £24 billion a year into housing benefit, which will remain outside universal credit for all supported housing, including homelessness shelters, and making £40 million in discretionary housing payments available for 2020-21. I come back to the point about the difficulty of navigating the system and the importance of ensuring that people are provided with the support they need to do so.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that as part of the rough sleeping strategy, special training is being provided to frontline staff to help people under the influence of narcotics, to ensure that such tragic deaths can be prevented in the future? We have had this problem in Derby, and I know that the police have had real difficulty in dealing with it.

Luke Hall: I can absolutely confirm that, and my hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of that training, which is going directly to the frontline. It is also worth pointing out that the rough sleeping strategy has created a specialist rough sleeping team made up of rough sleeping and homelessness experts with specialist knowledge across a wide range of areas, including addiction and alcohol issues. It is working with local authorities to reduce rough sleeping. I absolutely take on board what she says.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Cuts have consequences. Quite clearly, if we take £37 billion a year out of social security, there are consequences. It is time to end the benefits freeze and build genuinely affordable housing, especially social and council housing—does the Minister agree?

Luke Hall: There is absolutely no shying away from today's figures, so I take what the hon. Gentleman says head-on. The local housing allowance freeze is, of course, due to end in March 2020, and the Government are considering options for after the freeze. We are having continuing conversations about that issue.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Will the Minister join me in congratulating Lewes District Council, which along with Wealden and Rother managed to secure £120,000 earlier this year from the £46 million rough sleeping initiative? Does he agree that it is this Government who, for the first time, have got serious about tackling the causes of homelessness by introducing the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and providing £1.2 billion of support for tackling all the causes of homelessness?

Luke Hall: I thank my hon. Friend and congratulate her local authority. One of the important points about the Homelessness Reduction Act is that for the first time, we have a year's worth of data showing the importance of the early intervention that she talks about. She is right that it is backed up with £1.2 billion of funding, but of course today's statistics show that there is so much more to be done.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (LD): The fact that, in this city—arguably one of the wealthiest on the planet—110 people lost their lives last year is a complete outrage.

I am afraid that the fact that the figure has increased by 20% year on year is a damning indictment of the Minister's Government.

Why are we continuing to criminalise people who are sleeping rough on our streets and begging? Is it not time that we got rid of the Dickensian Vagrancy Act, which is criminalising people instead of giving them the support that they need?

Luke Hall: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. We have of course been reviewing the Act, and I take what he says extremely seriously. We are engaging with the police, local authorities and community groups to see what the most effective method of both support and enforcement is, but he is right that these are heartbreaking statistics, and the number of people who lose their lives on our streets is completely unacceptable.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his position, and I welcome the assured way in which he has dealt with his debut performance on this difficult subject.

In Worthing, we have an innovative project whereby Roffey Homes, a developer, bought a nurses' home and has given it to Turning Tides, a homelessness charity, to use for the next five years, before it wants to develop it. With the support of Worthing Council and with Government funding, it has taken more than 30 people off the streets, providing not just accommodation but mental health support, training support, benefits advice and everything else. It is not without problems, not least the constant complaints and undermining by local Labour councillors, but does the Minister agree that we need this sort of innovative approach if we are to find sustainable solutions for people living and sleeping rough?

Luke Hall: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that example of good practice in his constituency. I was not aware of that project, but I would be happy to visit it. Of course, that good practice does not disguise the fact that there is so much more for us to achieve as a Government to tackle rough sleeping by 2027.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): How many of the homeless people who have died were in receipt of benefit, and how many were not, and why not? If the Minister does not know the answer, will he undertake to write to me and place the answer in the Library so that we can all know the truth?

Luke Hall: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question. I do not have that information on me today, but if we have it, I absolutely give that undertaking.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): The causes of and solutions to rough sleeping are never simple. I welcome the action that the Government have taken and encourage them to work with local authorities and the extraordinary range of charities and voluntary organisations, such as Churches Together in Basildon, which works tirelessly to tackle homelessness and get people off our streets, giving them a warm and dry place to sleep and a hot meal and, more importantly, helping them to access the support systems that are available but that they seem to have fallen out of.

Luke Hall: I am absolutely delighted to place on record my thanks to Churches Together, both in his constituency and across the country. He is right that there is a vital role for community groups and charities around the country in the prevention of homelessness.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): My local authority, Westminster, has the highest number of rough sleepers in the country. Its rough sleeping strategy found that a third of rough sleepers had been discharged on to the streets from prison, and of course others are ex-servicemen. Can the Minister tell us how many deaths have occurred among people who have been released on to the streets from prison? If he does not know, will he place that information in the Library, and can he tell us how on earth that is allowed to happen?

Luke Hall: I completely understand the importance of this issue to the hon. Lady's constituency and in Westminster. If we are to end rough sleeping, we need to ensure that people leaving prison are supported into accommodation—I say that as both a Minister and someone with three prisons in his constituency. It is important to note the offender accommodation pilots that are under way at HMP Bristol, Leeds and Pentonville, but I am happy to meet her and the local council again to see how we can take this further.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I had the privilege of serving on the Public Bill Committee on the Homelessness Reduction Bill, which was piloted through by my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) and passed on a cross-party basis. In welcoming the Minister to his place, may I too invite him to pay tribute to local organisations that support the homeless? In my areas there are organisations such as Routes to Roots, in Poole. What more can we do to support such organisations?

Luke Hall: My hon. Friend is right, and I thank him for his work not just on the Bill Committee on the Homelessness Reduction Act but in working with charities in his constituency. I absolutely pay tribute to them for their work, and I hope to visit them with him soon to hear more about their work.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Leeds City Council, through its very impressive street support team, which brings together all the agencies working with the street homeless in our city, is making effective use of funding under the Housing First programme. That enables people who might not be able to comply with the conditions that hostels reasonably require, because of their drug and alcohol problems, to get into permanent accommodation with support. May I urge the Minister to increase the support that he is making available to local authorities such as Leeds through that programme? I have seen from that team that it is being put to extremely good use.

Luke Hall: I welcome the tone of the right hon. Gentleman's question. He is right that the Housing First pilots are working very well. In a lot of instances they are backed up by international evidence that supports the programme, and we are building a strong evidence base to see how it can be continued and expanded. I thank his local authority for the work that it is doing.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): I welcome the Minister's passion for tackling this shameful situation. Stevenage Borough Council has had a terrible track record in tackling homelessness while I have been a Member of Parliament over the past 10 years. It still tells my constituents that they are intentionally homeless, which is unacceptable. Will the Minister meet me and local homelessness charities to work out what we can do to support the homeless in my community?

Luke Hall: I am absolutely happy to meet my hon. Friend and perhaps hold a roundtable with his local authority to ensure that we are all working together to tackle this issue. There is no getting away from the difficulty of today's news and today's figures, and I will work with anybody who can help bring this scourge to an end.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Since 2010, homelessness in Newcastle has risen dramatically, visibly and tragically, with deaths in our city centre. Under the Minister's Government, rough sleeping has been normalised, but it will never be normal to us. I have spoken extensively to Northumbria police, local housing associations, charities and public health officials, and it is clear that the cuts to public services are a prime cause. Will he acknowledge that austerity has caused this problem, and does he agree that it must be reversed?

Luke Hall: First, let me put on the record my thanks to Crisis, which I know does so much work in Newcastle, and highlight the success so far of the rough sleeping initiative, which is in the hon. Lady's constituency and where we saw a 19% reduction in rough sleeping. She is right to highlight the importance of health services and other services available to people who are rough sleeping and homeless. This is why we have committed £30 million from NHS England to address rough sleeping over the next five years and £2 million in health funding to test models of community-based provision.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): No one should have to sleep rough, but there are people sleeping rough on the streets of Harrogate. Yet I have been told by those at the Harrogate homeless hostel, which is run by a fantastic local charity that has been doing great work for many years, that it has empty beds each night. So we have to work harder to understand the reasons why people feel that sleeping rough is their only option. Will the Minister join me in praising the joint initiative between Harrogate Borough Council and that hostel, whereby the council funds an outreach worker whose role is to go out and work with rough sleepers to help to address the underlying causes and make sure that the most vulnerable in our community get the support they need?

Luke Hall: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I pay tribute to that work and to outreach workers around the country. I have spent many evenings with outreach workers in the past few months, listening to the stories they have to tell and hearing some of the difficult facts being relayed to me as the Minister responsible. I am happy to pay tribute to the work that his local authority is doing.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): We know from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities that the rent arrears of those on universal credit are two and half times the arrears of those on housing benefit. Will the Minister therefore tell us what discussions he is having with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that we are addressing the issue of rent arrears?

Luke Hall: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight this issue. We are having constant discussions with Ministers about these issues. Both that issue and the one about the local housing allowance are raised most often with me, and I am having constant discussions with my colleagues on the Front Bench about the way forward.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): May I praise the work of organisations such as the Welsh Veterans Partnership in my community, which works to support veterans and ensure they are adequately housed, and the Salvation Army, which has Tŷ Gobaith in my patch? I visited it recently and its Bridge programme does fantastic work with those who have serious drug and alcohol addiction issues. What is the Minister doing to ensure that intensive programmes such as that are properly available to all who need them across the UK? Without that, people are not going to get the support they need.

Luke Hall: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that example of positive work in his constituency, and I am happy to look at how such initiatives can be expanded more widely. We of course have the rough sleeping initiative, which is being expanded, as are the funding and services made available. I am happy to go away and look at the example he has raised.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) on tabling this urgent question and thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting it. The figure of 726 deaths of homeless people shames our nation. In an urgent question such as this, several issues inevitably become conflated, for the best of reasons, but “homelessness” is different from rough sleeping and from the number of people who die while homeless. The causes of homelessness are incredibly diverse and affect a very diverse range of people. The number of people who are rough sleepers is rather less diverse and the number of people who die through being homeless is even less diverse; the biggest cohort of people who die while homeless are men who have a drug problem, an alcohol problem, or both. Specifically, what are we doing to prevent the deaths of men who have drug problems and/or alcohol problems and are homeless?

Luke Hall: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The Homelessness Reduction Act was genuinely a groundbreaking piece of legislation. For the first time, we now have some proper evidence about the importance of prevention. We see that the biggest group that has been helped by that Act is single men, because they can often end up on the streets. As we have seen, 88% of the 726 people who died last year were men. The Act is helping us to make substantial progress, but he is right about the importance of focusing on this issue.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I understand that there have been a mere 180 transactions under the ludicrous housing association right-to-buy lottery. Why does the Minister not just admit that was always a daft idea, divert the remaining £190 million to an emergency winter programme and spare us a spate of people freezing to death on the streets?

Luke Hall: It is genuinely important to note the raising of the housing revenue account borrowing cap, so that local authorities have the ability to borrow money to build properties themselves. I take what the hon. Gentleman says extremely seriously. We should make sure that in areas such as his we have the rough sleeping initiative, as we are seeing progress, with a 19% direct fall. I am happy to have further discussion with him on this matter.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Behind one of the shameful homeless death statistics is Jake Humm, a 22-year-old from Brighton who took his life last year, despite trying so hard to access support from local services such as Room to Rant, a brilliant project that helps young people find peer support through music. The Government have slashed local authority services and funding, which means that grassroots projects such as Room to Rant do not necessarily have the funding they need to support people such as Jake. When will the Minister reverse those cuts to funding so that those grassroots projects, which are literally a lifeline for so many, can continue in the future?

Luke Hall: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. We are doing a huge amount in Brighton with local partnerships, and Dame Carol Black has visited Brighton as well. It is an area covered by the rough sleeping initiative, but I know that there is a huge amount more progress to be made. I am happy to speak to the hon. Lady or go to Brighton to look at what more can be done to make progress on an extremely challenging issue in her constituency.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Under the last Labour Government homelessness came down, partly because we made beds available for those who were on the streets so that those who wanted to move into accommodation could do so and those who were working with the hardest to move could focus their attention on those people. Does the Minister intend to return to that sort of strategy? How many of these deaths would have been avoidable had those beds still existed?

Luke Hall: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that question. Part of the rough sleeping strategy and rough sleeping initiative is about delivering both the 2,600 new bed spaces next year and the 750 staff to provide support in tackling the sort of issues he is talking about.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): If every seat, aisle and step in this Chamber was full, we still could not fit in every person who has died in the streets in this country, and that is actively at the door of the Government. We have had the cuts to housing and support services, particularly drug and alcohol services, and those chickens are coming home to roost. This cannot be fixed with the Housing Minister changing

[*Jim McMahon*]

every few months, and by coming and making excuses. We need proper action and proper funding, and the Government need to take responsibility for the impact of welfare reform.

Luke Hall: The hon. Gentleman should bear in mind the £1.2 billion that is going in to provide homelessness support through the rough sleeping strategy. He makes an extremely valid point; there is no shying away from a hugely difficult set of statistics, and we should all pause for thought. He paints a vivid image. It is right to point to the fact that we are continuing to invest in our health services, with £30 million made available from NHS England for rough sleeping over the next five years, and £2 million in health funding to test these community-based models of provision, but he is right: there is no shying away from and no complacency about the fact that this is an extremely difficult issue affecting our whole society. We will strain every sinew to make this happen.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is right that we should get homeless people off the streets, but I also have real concerns about the unregulated supported housing sector. I have discussed that with the Minister's officials and his predecessor. The Charities Commission has just reported on Wick House in my constituency, where several people have died, and there seems to be consensus that we need regulation of this sector, to prevent exploitative landlords from moving into it. Will the Minister follow up on my conversations? Can we see some action on this, please?

Luke Hall: It is absolutely unacceptable that vulnerable people—indeed anybody—should have to live in poor-quality housing. She raises the issue of Wick House, which we both know about, as west of England Members of Parliament. I have been having those conversations this morning and I will be happy to update her as soon as I can.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): First, will the Minister thank all those charities that help out the homeless and have brought down the number of deaths in this country? Recently, on 9 September, I joined a rally on the homelessness campaign just outside Parliament. The message was clear from people who are homeless: all they seek is a roof over their head. No one wants to be homeless. There are many reasons for it, and many cities, towns and rural villages now have homelessness problems. Will the Minister therefore join in Labour's plans for funding to ensure that we have emergency cover during the winter months and that no one should be allowed to die on our streets?

Luke Hall: This year we have doubled the cold weather fund, to which local authorities can apply now, and I encourage his local authority to do so. He made a really intelligent and correct remark about the complexity of the different reasons why people end up on the streets. One positive that has come out of the 2017 Act is that for the first time we have some evidential data about why people end up on the streets, who is most at risk and how we can support them best. I absolutely take the points he makes to heart and will absolutely follow them up.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Every evening, as we leave this opulent building, we see a growing number of homeless people—in the tube station, outside the buildings, in shop doorways and anywhere else where they can seek shelter. It is clear that the Government are not doing enough. Homelessness has at least doubled since 2010; why does the Minister think that is? Does he recognise that swingeing cuts to the welfare budget and substance-misuse services have contributed to that rise?

Luke Hall: I say again that there is absolutely no shying away from the extremely difficult and upsetting set of statistics released today that shows that we need to do more. That is absolutely right, and that is why we are increasing the budget by £54 million next year—a 13% real-terms rise. The hon. Lady raises some extremely important issues. We have increased the welfare budget, but I understand the importance of the issues she raises, especially the numerous concerns relating to the LHA freeze. We are of course continuing to consider options for after that freeze next year.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): The number of rough sleepers declined under the Labour Government, which left office in 2010. Since 2010, the number has doubled. What was the reason for the change in fortune of rough sleepers since 2010? Why have those figures increased?

Luke Hall: The importance of the 2017 Act is that now we are really going to have some evidential information about why. If Members look at the information we have from the first year, they will see the progress that has been made, especially on supporting single men, and the importance and priority of early intervention. The hon. Gentleman raises an extremely important point, though, and there is no shying away from the hugely difficult set of statistics released today. We will strain every single sinew going forward. We are increasing the funding, with £54 million more next year, £30 million from NHS England to support health projects and £2 million for urgent intervention in community health services.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): There have been some groundbreaking projects to help with the rapid rise in rough sleeping in Oxford, but they have really suffered from being short-term funded. Most of the money the Minister is talking about is just for the short term. The stamp duty surcharge on overseas property buyers is sustainable funding that is meant to last over the long term, but his Government decided that it was going to be set at a third of the level they originally committed to. Will the Minister explain why his Government apparently decided to prioritise the wealth of overseas property investors over the needs of vulnerable rough sleepers? I just do not understand it.

Luke Hall: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that point, which I am happy to look into in more detail. In Oxford, as in so many other areas throughout the country, the rough sleeping initiative is reducing rough sleeping—it is down by 19% directly since 2017 and there has been a 32% reduction compared with where we would have been had it not been introduced—but I absolutely take seriously the points that have been raised from all parts of the Chamber.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I do not think anyone can question the sincerity of the Minister's answers, but I am disappointed that he did not answer possibly the most important question that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) asked from her position of substantial knowledge of the impact that drug misuse is having among her constituents. The specific question was about the Government allowing, even on a trial basis, the establishment of a consumption room, under medical supervision, to see what difference that makes to the awful death toll that drug use is causing in Glasgow and elsewhere. Will the Minister at least commit to go back to his Cabinet colleagues and ask them to consider seriously the fact that drug misuse should be treated as a public health crisis, not as a criminal justice matter?

Luke Hall: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree that Dame Carol Black is absolutely the right person to lead the independent review of drugs policy. All these issues are being considered and I look forward to reading the recommendations.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): As chair of the all-party group on ending homelessness, I agree with the Minister that this is a challenging issue, but the simple truth is that this was not happening on this scale in 2010, before the cuts to mental health services, to drug and alcohol cessation services, to councils and even to benefits for some of the most disabled people with mental health conditions in our country. Does the Minister regret the lost decade of cuts and the loss of life that we now know it has directly contributed to?

Luke Hall: I regret every single life lost on our streets. It is heartbreaking that those 729 people died on our streets last year. That demonstrates the need as clearly as ever—there is so much more to do. I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and come to the all-party group to discuss this in much more detail.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The Minister is before us to convince us of the Government's seriousness in taking forward this issue. Back in March, the UK Statistics Authority urged the Government to improve the quality of their homelessness figures, because if the Government do not know exactly how many people are homeless, how can they possibly expect to deal with the issue? What action have the Government taken on that advice?

Luke Hall: One important thing in the rough sleeping initiative and the impact evaluation that we published a couple of weeks ago was the work on looking at the method we used to carry out the counts. The information and data that we have clearly proves that changing from a count to an estimate, or vice versa, did not have any impact on the reduction figures. Lots of different authorities represented by different political parties have made changes back and forward, but we have to be led by the evidence.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): In 2010, the annual count of homeless rough sleeping in Brighton was 500; it is now 1,200. Deaths on the street were a rarity; now, they come more than once a month in Brighton and Hove. What policy has changed between 2010 and now? Surely we need to understand the policy failure before we can fix it.

Luke Hall: As I said to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), there are absolutely issues in Brighton, as there are throughout the country. The rough sleeping initiative is having an impact: in the places where we are trialling the rough sleeping initiative, there has been a 19% direct fall since 2017 and a 32% reduction compared with where we would have been had it not been introduced. There is no shying away from it, though: there is much more to do in Brighton, as there is in other cities, towns and villages all around our country.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Every winter, the pretty village of Altnaharra in the epicentre of my vast far-northern constituency is the coldest place in the UK. As has been said already, the cold kills so many people sleeping rough. Have the Government looked at best practice in northern countries such as Norway, Sweden and Finland, to see how they are tackling this issue?

Luke Hall: Yes, absolutely, and we continue to have those conversations. I would be happy to keep in close contact with the hon. Gentleman and to have conversations as we move towards the winter. He should of course note that the cold weather fund has opened and we have doubled the money available since last year. I encourage his local authority to apply. I am more than happy to keep him updated as and when we look at the matter further.

Yemen

2.17 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Foreign Secretary to update the House on the latest developments in Yemen.

Mr Speaker: Well, it is not the Foreign Secretary but a substitute for said Minister. He will do his level best, we feel sure.

The Minister for Africa (Andrew Stephenson): The UK is deeply concerned by the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis in Yemen. We fully support the peace process, led by the UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths, and urge all parties to engage constructively with that process. A political settlement is the only way to bring long-term stability to Yemen and to address the worsening humanitarian crisis. A nationwide ceasefire will have effect on the ground only if it is underpinned by a political deal between the conflict parties.

The UK has been at the forefront of international efforts to bring a peaceful solution to the appalling conflict in Yemen. On 26 September, the UK co-hosted a political event at the UN General Assembly to co-ordinate the international community's support for the UN-led peace process and to endorse UN special envoy Martin Griffiths' plan to begin wider political discussion. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa visited the region from 25 to 29 August, in support of the United Nations' efforts to make political progress and alleviate the humanitarian situation.

Yemen remains the world's largest humanitarian crisis, with nearly 80% of the entire population—more than 24 million people—requiring some form of humanitarian assistance. The UK has shown extensive leadership in responding to the crisis, committing £770 million of support to Yemen since the conflict began in 2015. Our funding for this financial year is providing food for more than 1 million Yemenis each month and more than 1 million people with improved water supply and sanitation.

We have been very concerned by the UN's funding situation and the fact that it has been forced to stop delivering some of its life-saving support in Yemen. In response, the UK brought forward funding from our £200 million pledge and has already released 87% of the funding that we have pledged to UN agencies this year. We thank Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait for providing approximately \$800 million in September and urge all donors rapidly to distribute their humanitarian pledges.

Stephen Twigg: I thank the Minister for that response. As he says, the humanitarian consequences of the Yemen conflict are devastating. The United Nations has estimated that, by the end of this year, the combined death toll from the fighting and disease will be 230,000. I pay tribute to the Department for International Development for its response, which, as he rightly reminded us, has been one of the most generous in the world, but, as he said, humanitarian efforts remain critically underfunded. The United Nations programmes on vaccination, cholera prevention and malnutrition have been forced to close. We are now looking to the 2020 humanitarian response

plan. May I ask that the UK works with other donors to ensure that these life-saving programmes are restored? The previous Foreign Secretary provided real leadership on Yemen, and there is a concern that Yemen is no longer the Government priority that it was before July. Did the Prime Minister raise Yemen in his meeting with Iran's President Hassan Rouhani last week? What is the United Kingdom doing to engage coalition members to move towards a full ceasefire? The Minister welcomed the very positive meeting that was held at the UN General Assembly, but will he update the House on the outcomes of that meeting?

I welcome the decision at the UN Human Rights Council last week to extend the mandate of the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen. Those experts have found evidence of grave violations of international humanitarian law by all sides in the conflict. Does the Minister agree that all alleged violations of international law, by whichever side commits them, must be independently investigated and the perpetrators held fully to account? There can be no peace if we do not have justice.

Finally, there are reports of ceasefire discussions from both Saudi Arabia and the Houthis. These are encouraging reports, but the reports that I hear are about a partial ceasefire. Surely a ceasefire must cover the whole of the country. As we have seen since the Stockholm agreement last year, a ceasefire in one part of the country can simply result in increased fighting and civilian suffering elsewhere. Will the Government do everything in their power to bring about a full nationwide ceasefire in Yemen?

Andrew Stephenson: Let me start by thanking the hon. Gentleman for his tireless efforts as Chair of the International Development Committee in raising awareness of the humanitarian crisis that is going on following the conflict in Yemen. I am grateful for his sustained work supporting the UN-led peace process and the work of the UN special envoy. Yemen, as he rightly said, is the world's worst humanitarian disaster, and it is crucial that we continue to do everything we can to enable a peaceful solution to end the cycles of violence, and I share his statement about the chronic underfunding of the humanitarian relief at the moment. The British Government, our new Prime Minister and our new Foreign Secretary remain committed to keeping Britain at the forefront of efforts to find a political solution to this conflict. We are committed to using our resources to address the humanitarian crisis.

I had to leave the UN General Assembly early because of the recall of Parliament, so I am not fully briefed on what the Prime Minister discussed with the Iranians, but I am more than happy to take that away and find out whether Yemen was discussed with the Iranian Government.

The hon. Gentleman raises the Human Rights Council and the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen. He will be aware that the UK voted in favour of the UN Human Rights Council resolution to renew the mandate of the UN Group of Eminent Experts. Although we welcome the renewal of that mandate, it is disappointing that a single consensus resolution was not possible. We continue to support investigations into allegations and incidents that have happened in this conflict and we continue to push for a ceasefire. It is important, as the hon. Gentleman said, that that covers all parts of the country and that we get as much buy-in as possible.

There is no military solution to this conflict; there has to be a political solution. For that to work, everybody must sit round the table and discuss the best way forward.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very expert defence of the Government's policy in Yemen, but I wonder whether he could perhaps go even further in celebrating the work that Martin Griffiths has done as the special representative there. Will he also tell us a little bit about the work that his Department and other Departments in Government have done with Governor David Beasley of the World Food Programme? The work of the United Kingdom and others in opening up the port of Hodeidah to ensure that food aid is getting in, and the work that is being done with the Emirates and the Saudis in various other areas, is incredibly important in making sure that we have a coalition that works to relieve suffering in that country. Perhaps the Minister can say what more he and his colleagues will do to ensure that the UK's voice is indeed the voice of reason and peace in the area.

Andrew Stephenson: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for his support for the UN special envoy and his work. We all need to support Martin Griffiths, and to ensure that everybody gets behind the UN-led peace process. In my own portfolio of sub-Saharan Africa, I have been impressed—really impressed—by the World Food Programme's ability to deliver aid to some of the most conflict-afflicted countries. I have seen at first hand its work in South Sudan and Somalia since my appointment and I am more than happy to look further into what it is doing in Yemen. I know that it is doing an incredible amount of work there. At this point, I should add my apologies for the fact that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa is not in his place. He is undertaking some of his duties as an army reservist, and that is the only reason he is not taking this urgent question.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), the Chair of the International Development Committee, for securing it and for being one of Yemen's great champions.

I am sorry that the Foreign Secretary himself has not seen fit to answer this question, but then again this is a Foreign Secretary who made a 1,300-word speech in Manchester this weekend and chose not to mention Yemen once, yet on his watch the cycle of indiscriminate violence in Yemen and the scale of the humanitarian crisis are growing worse every day. This weekend, we had unconfirmed reports of a major Houthi strike against Saudi forces inside Saudi Arabia. On this day a month ago, we had the attack by Saudi planes on a Houthi detention centre in Dhamar, killing at least 100 innocent captives. In Aden, we had the ridiculous situation of forces supported by the UAE fighting soldiers loyal to the Hadi Government, which the UAE is supposed to be trying to reinstall, and all the while the toll of innocent children killed by malnutrition and cholera continues to mount. As things stand, there is no end in sight to the conflict and no end in sight to the suffering of the Yemeni people.

This is not only a humanitarian disaster, but a failure of politics. The UK really must pull its finger out and do its duty in the Security Council. As the penholder at the Security Council, it is supposed to table a UN resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire by all parties everywhere in the country. We on the Labour Benches have been calling for that resolution for three and a half years. Can the Minister of State tell us how many more months and years we will have to wait?

Finally, tomorrow will mark exactly one year since Jamal Khashoggi was butchered in the Saudi embassy in Istanbul, in large part for his criticism of the war in Yemen. A full 12 months on, this House has still not been presented with the results of the Government's investigation into who ordered his murder, let alone "the serious consequences" that we were promised from that Dispatch Box would follow. Again, can the Minister tell us how many more months, and now how many more years, we will have to wait?

Andrew Stephenson: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for her comments. The UK continues to call on all parties to the conflict in Yemen to exercise restraint and to engage constructively with the peace process led by the UN special envoy. We are monitoring claims of attacks in Saudi Arabia and are in contact with our partners to understand exactly what has happened there. We are also deeply concerned about reports of civilian deaths, following recent air strikes—our thoughts are with those who have been affected—and we are working with our partners to try to establish exactly what has happened. We welcome the coalition's referral of both recent incidents to be investigated by the Joint Incidents Assessment Team. The UK continues to call on all parties to the conflict in Yemen to exercise restraint, to comply fully with international humanitarian law and to engage constructively with the peace process led by the UN special envoy, which is the only way to end this cycle of violence.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I thank the Minister and his Department for their work in helping to alleviate this appalling humanitarian crisis. They have set a superb example to other countries.

What does the Minister make of the recent clashes between the Yemeni Government and the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council, which recently seized control of Aden? Surely everything possible must be done to prevent a civil war emerging within a much bigger civil war.

Does the Minister also agree that the Gulf initiative is probably now no longer valid? May I push him a bit on the need for another UN Security Council resolution, which I think is imperative? Will he comment on the recent outreach by his opposite number, US Assistant Secretary David Schenker, who is trying to speak to the Houthi rebels to bring them into a wide-ranging peace process?

Andrew Stephenson: We are working closely with the US as a member of the Quad, and we work well with a number of our international partners. To go back to my original point, I urge restraint on all sides. I read, as I am sure my hon. Friend did, the in-depth article in *The Guardian* this morning about factional fighting in Yemen, which is obviously of concern. We are trying to

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establish the facts of these situations. The most important thing, however, is to realise that there is no military solution to the conflict. We urge restraint on all sides. Everyone has to follow the UN peace process.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I, too, thank the Chair of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), for securing this urgent and important question.

As the Minister and others have pointed out, this is one of the great humanitarian crises of our age, and one that is not only having a particularly detrimental effect on children but is man-made. I pay tribute, as I am sure we all do, to the extraordinary work of humanitarian organisations in Yemen, in some of the most difficult circumstances. The Minister was right to point to the humanitarian aid from the UK, but it has been eclipsed by the money coming in from arms sales since the start of the war. Surely that should be the other way around. I ask the Minister to address that. In particular since the Secretary of State for International Trade was forced to apologise, what additional measures have been put in place by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, because there were allusions to the failures of the Minister's Department? Also, will the Minister update us on whether there is anything else of which this House should know or be made aware? Will he suspend any existing licences? We have asked about independent investigations—it was right to bring that up—and will the Minister investigate the alleged bombings of Oxfam water projects? That is incredibly important.

Finally, the UK is the penholder. As the penholder, the UK must be seen as an honest broker. Selling arms to one side while being seen as an honest broker just does not cut it. Will the Minister respond to that?

Andrew Stephenson: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the UK contribution to humanitarian assistance. The UK is one of the biggest donors to reconstruction in Yemen and in helping to deal with the immediate humanitarian concerns. Since the Yemen conflict began in 2015, our partners have reported two incidents to us in which UK-funded assets incurred damage as a result of the conflict. We urge all air strikes in which there are civilian casualties, in particular those that hit NGOs, to be fully investigated. We work with our partners to ensure that there are investigations into such matters.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade said in her statement to the House last week, the Government unreservedly apologise for the export licences that were issued in error. She has taken immediate action, including informing the Court of Appeal and Parliament, putting in place immediate interim procedures to ensure that the errors do not happen again, and instigating a full internal review of all licences granted to Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners since 20 June.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): My role as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief involves engaging with international partners multilaterally and bilaterally to promote freedom of religion and belief. The UN has said that Baha'is living in rebel-held territory in Yemen have faced a

persistent pattern of persecution, including harassment and arbitrary detention. Will the Minister ensure that freedom of religion is a key priority in all our discussions internationally?

Andrew Stephenson: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment. This is something that he has long championed, and I look forward to working with him on this in the coming weeks and months. Freedom of religion and belief in all countries around the world is very important to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In particular, I am keen to see how we can work together on the situation in Yemen.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Unless there is an immediate ceasefire, by the end of this year 233,000 people will have died in Yemen, including 150,000 children under the age of five. What are we doing to try to get a ceasefire through a UN resolution? What are we actually doing? Tell us.

Andrew Stephenson: There were conversations about that at the UN General Assembly, which was attended by a number of Ministers. Unfortunately, we all had to cut our programmes short to return to the United Kingdom, but we will continue through the United Nations Security Council and other forums to ensure that the needs of Yemen are always discussed. We will see what we can do. We are leading efforts in support of the UN peace process in this area.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I congratulate the Government on the amount of humanitarian aid that they have given to Yemen. Many NGOs and other organisations are trying to get food to the people in Yemen who desperately need it. Women who are pregnant desperately need that food, because if their children are born stunted—which they will be if they have malnutrition—they will never catch up, impoverishing the whole future of Yemen. Will the Minister please persuade other countries to do their bit just as Britain is doing?

Andrew Stephenson: I thank my hon. Friend for her pertinent question. So far this year in Yemen UK aid has helped to admit 250,000 children to health facilities and mobile clinics for malnutrition. UK aid supported 900,000 children to gain access to primary care in Yemen in the past year but, unfortunately, 2.5 million children in Yemen have irreversible stunted growth. We need to continue to work with international partners to ensure that more money is dedicated to that, because it is irreversible when it happens.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Does the Minister share my horror at the air strike that took place last week on a civilian area in Qataba, which killed 15 people, five of them children, and injured 13, seven of them children? Does he know that Save the Children has been calling for an independent investigation into that attack, so that the perpetrators can be held accountable? Will he support the call for an independent investigation and, if so, how will he help to bring it about?

Andrew Stephenson: We remain deeply concerned about reports of civilian deaths from any air strikes, in particular the case that he cited. Our thoughts are of course with all those affected. We are working with our

partners to establish exactly what happened—that is the most important thing for us to do as a first step—and we welcome the coalition's referral of two recent incidents for investigation by the Joint Incidents Assessment Team. The UK continues to call on all parties to the conflict in Yemen to exercise restraint, to comply fully with international humanitarian law and to engage constructively with the UN peace process.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Hezbollah has been involved in Yemen since the start of the conflict, providing training and weapons for the Houthis. When this Government decided to proscribe Hezbollah as an organisation, Opposition Members did not support them. Will the Minister condemn the role of Hezbollah in prolonging the conflict, and what words does he have for the Opposition?

Andrew Stephenson: The situation in Yemen is complex. There are a range of different actors in different parts of the country. All I would say is that we need restraint on all sides. There is no military solution to this conflict. A lasting solution can only be achieved through the UN-led peace process.

Jane Dodds (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): Would the Minister agree that the UK has earned eight times more from sales of arms to Saudi Arabia and other members of the coalition in Yemen than it has spent on aid to help civilians? Right now, 10 million people are on the brink of famine. Some £770 million has been spent on aid to the region, and we are grateful for that, but there has also been £6.2 billion of arms sales to the coalition. We do not want thoughts or words; we want action to stop the war in Yemen and people dying.

Andrew Stephenson: As the hon. Lady will know, the UK has some of the most stringent arms exports licences in the world. *[Interruption.]* I know that some Members across this House would be happy to sacrifice our defence industry and jobs, but we work with countries around the world. We ensure that we are exporting defence equipment only to countries that are in compliance with international humanitarian law and, as has been so shown by the recent Court case, we are immediately stopping a supply of new licences and are investigating incidents where licences have been granted contrary to the Court judgment.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I welcome the appearance of the Minister of State at the Dispatch Box, Mr Speaker, even if you do not.

As the Chair of the Select Committee has mentioned, the humanitarian situation in Yemen remains horrendous, but the impact falls disproportionately on women and girls. Since the beginning of the conflict, there has been an increase of more than two thirds in reported incidents of gender-based violence. Maternal death rates have also doubled in the past four years, as only a third of maternal and early years health services remain intact. What more can we do to help the most affected part of the Yemeni population for future generations, for the perfectly good reasons mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham)?

Mr Speaker: I enjoyed the hon. Gentleman's question. However, as colleagues will know, I always welcome Ministers to the Dispatch Box to answer urgent questions

that I have granted. That point is so blindingly obvious that only a very, very, very clever person could fail to grasp it.

Andrew Stephenson: The UK has supported 1,700 survivors of gender-based violence since 2017 through our £13 million of funding to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organisation for Migration. My hon. Friend is correct, though, to raise this issue as one of the most pressing in the conflict, with the number of incidents of gender-based violence reported to have risen by more than 60% since the start of the conflict.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): One action that the Government could take immediately would be to tell the Government of Sudan to withdraw their Rapid Support Forces from Yemen and to tell the Saudis to stop paying them.

Andrew Stephenson: We call for restraint on all sides in this conflict. As I said in my opening response to the urgent question, there is no military solution. The only solution is to follow the UN-led peace process.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Given Iran's involvement in the conflict, what actions are the United Kingdom Government taking to try to get an agreed effective policy towards Iran between the United States and other NATO allies?

Andrew Stephenson: The Government have long-standing concerns about the Iranian involvement in Yemen which we have raised with the Iranian Government. Iran's provision of weapons to the Houthis contravenes UN Security Council resolution 2216 and the Security Council's embargo on exports of weapons to Iran. We are deeply concerned by the findings of the UN panel of experts on Yemen that missiles and related military equipment of Iranian origin were introduced into Yemen after the imposition of the targeted arms embargo.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The UK Government's multiple breaches of the Court order preventing the issuing of new licences for arms sales to Saudi Arabia has made a mockery of the UK Government's claims that they have a rigorous and robust control of arms export controls. These arms are being used to cause untold suffering in Yemen. Does the Minister not agree that it really is time for the UK to do the right thing and stop all arms sales to Saudi Arabia for good, as it is a brutal regime with scant regard for international law, or will the UK Government continue to be complicit in the atrocities in Yemen?

Andrew Stephenson: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade said in her statement to the House last week, the Government unreservedly apologise for the export licences that were issued in error. She has taken immediate steps, including informing the Court and Parliament, and has put in place further steps and interim procedures to ensure that these errors do not happen again.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Is not the truth of the matter that the conflict in Yemen is not going to end until Iran stops using the conflict as a

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proxy for its conflict with Saudi Arabia? Rather than engaging in a direct assault on Saudi Arabia, Iran prefers to use and fund the Houthi rebels to do just that. Other Iranian proxies such as Hezbollah are directly involved in providing the Houthis with missile technology. I know that the Minister says there is no military solution to this conflict. If that is right, the Iranians have to be persuaded to withdraw.

Andrew Stephenson: We encourage Iran to demonstrate that it can be a constructive part of the solution through promoting stability and showing commitment to the unity, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Yemen. We hope that Iran can use its influence with the Houthis to encourage de-escalation of the current crisis, end their attacks on coalition countries and support a return to a political dialogue.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (IGC): In his speech at the United Nations General Assembly two days ago, Yemen Foreign Minister Mohammed Abdullah Al-Hadhrami attacked and criticised Iran for its support of the Houthis, but also strongly criticised the United Arab Emirates for its support for the Southern Transitional Council in Aden. What is the position of the British Government as regards the positions taken by the UAE, and what contact have we had with the Southern Transitional Council?

Andrew Stephenson: We are in regular dialogue with representatives of the UAE. I referenced in one of my previous responses the rather concerning report in *The Guardian* today about some of the incidents that have happened. I am in regular discussion with the UAE, but I will more than happily write to the hon. Gentleman on this specific matter.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Considering that the Saudi National Guard has been militarily active in Yemen, what can the Minister tell us about Sangcom, the 10-year £2 billion Saudi Arabia National Guard Communications Project that is a collaboration between the Saudi regime and the British Government and is reportedly led by the Ministry of Defence?

Andrew Stephenson: I may also have to write to the hon. Gentleman in response to that question. We do have a defence relationship with Saudi Arabia and work closely with the country on a number of projects, but I am not fully abreast of the details of that specific programme.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): In answering my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), the Minister spoke about the need to investigate the shocking attacks on aid facilities in Yemen, yet Oxfam says that it has never so much as been interviewed about bombings of its water projects and water warehouses there. Are those investigations really happening, and why should we take them seriously if even those interviews have not occurred?

Andrew Stephenson: A large number of investigations have taken place. The Saudi Foreign Minister has been to this House in the past and has answered questions

from Members about some of those investigations, and I know that more than 100 have now been brought to a conclusion. Of course we want damage or incidents involving civilian casualties to be investigated very thoroughly, particularly when NGOs or partner organisations are involved, and we ask searching questions about what has gone on in such incidents.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): What the Minister says about the UK calling on all sides to cease the fighting would be more convincing if he was able to tell us whether the Prime Minister mentioned Yemen in his meeting with President Rouhani. I appreciate that the Minister has stepped into the breach somewhat, but that would have been rather a key piece of information to bring to a statement about this conflict. I expect our Government to have relatively limited power with the Houthis and with the Iranians, but we should expect more from the Minister and from this Government in terms of our relationship with the Saudi Arabians. Given that the UK is continuing to trade weapons with the Saudis, can the Minister tell us a little bit more about what success we have had in terms of getting these investigations into breaches of humanitarian law and what actual influence we are having?

Andrew Stephenson: There is a range of questions there. I am sure that our Prime Minister raised this in his UN discussions, although I will have to come back to the House on the details. I know that the Foreign Secretary also met his Iranian counterpart at the UN. Between those discussions, I am sure that the situation in Yemen was of course discussed. The UK hosts regular meetings on this between Foreign Ministers in the Quad. We are taking a lead in ensuring that the needs in Yemen are never off the agenda.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The Houthi rebels have been, quite rightly, roundly condemned for their use of child soldiers. Is the Minister as concerned as I am by reports that it now seems that the Saudi-led coalition might be trying to use child soldiers originally from Sudan? What more can the Government do to stop this terrible use of children in conflict?

Andrew Stephenson: The UK is committed to ending the recruitment and use of child soldiers and protecting all children from armed conflict. We condemn in the strongest terms all grave violations and abuses committed against children in Yemen and urge all parties to the conflict to immediately cease all violations of applicable international law, including these grave violations.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I was glad to see that the International Committee of the Red Cross had facilitated the release of 290 detainees yesterday. They are among many people in Yemen who have been arbitrarily detained and whose families do not know where they have gone. What more is the Minister doing and his Government doing, because it was one of the planks of the Stockholm agreement that prisoners would be released? What more can be done?

Andrew Stephenson: The UK offers full support to Martin Griffiths' UN-led process as well as the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross. In April, the Yemen Quad reaffirmed its endorsement of the

agreement reached in Stockholm by Yemeni parties in December 2018. We have previously seconded an individual to the UN to support the work of the executive mechanism for agreement on prisoner exchange. Obviously we welcome the very welcome news of the release of prisoners that we have seen in the past few days, but there is clearly more that needs to be done on all sides.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I have lost count of the number of times in the four years that I have been here when we have discussed Yemen in this Chamber, yet little or nothing has changed, so let me ask again a question I first asked in 2016 and is sadly still relevant: what does a regime have to do—how many breaches of humanitarian international law does it have to commit—before this Government deem it an unacceptable partner with which to deal arms?

Andrew Stephenson: The UK takes its exporting licence obligations extremely seriously. We operate one of the most robust export control regimes in the world.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The *Guardian* report yesterday that the Minister mentioned reveals that motor parts made in the Goodrich factory in Wolverhampton were found in fragments of illegal cluster bombs dropped by the Saudi coalition in Yemen. Can he please explain how UK components found their way into a bomb that is banned under international law, why on earth our allies—supposedly—are using such deadly weapons in Yemen, and what the Government are going to do about it?

Andrew Stephenson: I cannot comment on the specifics of what the hon. Gentleman has said, but in terms of recent licences we very much regret the licences that were issued in error. The International Trade Secretary commissioned a full and urgent investigation into those breaches as soon as they were discovered. Throughout the investigation, all decisions made on export licences to Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners will be subject to additional compliance checks, including closer collaboration between Departments so that no further licences are issued in error.

Points of Order

2.54 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wonder if I might seek your advice. My understanding is that Ministers should not knowingly mislead the House. However, during Treasury questions this morning the Chief Secretary to the Treasury implied that the UK was performing well in the cancer survival league tables. This is not correct and creates a false impression. I have checked in the Library and I have the latest article in *The Lancet* which has a comparative study, and unfortunately the United Kingdom is bottom in all seven categories: cancers of the oesophagus, stomach, colon, rectum, pancreas, lung and ovary. So I really think it is important that the record is corrected, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his attempted point of order. I recognise, as many other Members will, that he speaks with very considerable personal knowledge and authority on this subject. If memory serves me correctly, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said that cancer survival rates were improving. I think that is what he said. The hon. Gentleman has made the point that in respect of the seven most common cancers, the UK is at, or close to, the bottom of a league table. I say with no pleasure that those two statements are not mutually exclusive. However, I recognise that in the context of what is a point of debate, he was very concerned to put his thoughts on the record. He has done so, and that record is there to be studied by people within the House and outside it. I thank him for what he has said.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We are aware that the Government's major attention at the moment appears to be a couple of hundred miles to the north of where we are, but I do think that if Parliament is sitting and we are going to have urgent questions on matters as crucial as today's, it is beholden on the Government to ensure that if the Secretary of State is unable to attend, the Minister is given the relevant information to be able to ensure that the exchanges can be performed in a way that actually provides information to people watching these proceedings and, crucially, to Members of Parliament. I do not blame the Minister himself, but on the key factor about what the UK has done either with the Iranians or with the Saudi Arabians, he has not been in a position to respond, and I do think that that diminishes these proceedings. I wonder if you are able to get a message to the Government to ensure that people who come to the Dispatch Box are in a position to be able to respond on the key factors that they are going to be asked about.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his attempted point of order. The Minister has signalled an interest in responding, and of course I will hear him.

The Minister for Africa (Andrew Stephenson): If I could clarify, Mr Speaker, I said before that the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa was undertaking Army reserve duties, but it was actually Navy reserve duties. It is not the Conservative party conference that is the reason why the responsible Foreign Office Minister is not at the Dispatch Box today.

Mr Speaker: That is a helpful clarification and I thank the Minister of State for it. There is no rule on the matter. I say this as much for the intelligibility of our proceedings to observers as for the interest of Members. Who the Government field to respond to an urgent question granted by the Speaker is a matter for the Government. The natural desire and, I think, greater expectation on the part of colleagues that a Minister will be able to oblige is noted by the Chair, and more widely, I think, understood across the House. I think the point will convey itself to Government Whips, the Leader of the House and so on. Meanwhile, the Minister has courteously explained the position, and he did respond to all questions as fully as he felt able to. I genuinely thank him for that.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (IGC): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Yes, indeed—a point of order from Mike Gapes. He certainly knows about Foreign Office matters.

Mike Gapes: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. It is a genuine point of order. The Minister, in response to me and to some others, said that he would write to us. My question to you, Mr Speaker, is that if there were to be a Prorogation in the next few days, and a Queen's Speech, what happens in the case where there has been no answer and we have been told that the Minister will write?

Mr Speaker: The answer to that is that Prorogation should not affect the moral obligation to keep a promise to send a letter, so if the Minister has volunteered written replies, which in a number of cases he did, the obligation to provide those replies continues to apply, and I am sure that he would expect to do so. As long as a Minister is in office—and one fully expects that he will continue to be in office; one has to work on that assumption as there is absolutely no reason to think otherwise—he will expect to redeem his commitment. I think we will leave it there for now. I hope that is satisfactory to the hon. Gentleman.

Exiting the European Union (Agriculture)

3 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I beg to move,

That the draft Common Organisation of the Markets in Agricultural Products (Transitional Arrangements etc.) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 24 July, be approved.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), and a number of other Members may, in the case of this statutory instrument and two others that we will consider this afternoon, have a sense of déjà vu, not for the first time in issues relating to EU exit. I will explain why these further statutory instruments are necessary, but I do not envisage that we will need to take up the full time allocated for them, unless the shadow Minister feels that he did not rehearse these issues in the detail he would have liked to last time. This particular instrument concerns the common organisation of the agricultural markets, more commonly referred to as the CMO in EU parlance. The CMO sits in pillar 1 of the common agricultural policy alongside direct payments, and it was set up as a means of meeting the objectives of the CAP, in particular with regard to stabilising markets, ensuring a fair standard of living for agricultural producers and increasing agricultural productivity.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): How does that impact subsidies to farmers, which must affect the markets? Where are we in terms of the continuation of subsidies to stabilise those markets?

George Eustice: Retained EU law means that the existing basic payment scheme will continue. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Agriculture Bill, which has been before the House, outlines a plan to evolve that policy over a period of seven years, but that is not the issue before us today. This particular instrument relates to the CMO regulations.

In March this year, six EU exit operability SIs concerning the CMO were debated in the House, approved and made. Those SIs sought to make retained EU law operable in the domestic UK context. The instrument under debate amends one of those existing EU exit SIs: the Common Organisation of the Markets in Agricultural Products and Common Agricultural Policy (Miscellaneous Amendments) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019. The existing SI, which was passed in March, ensured the operability of certain provisions relating to the reserved policy areas of regulation of anti-competitive practices, international trade, imports and exports and intellectual property law. Among other things, it establishes transitional periods for the import documentation for hops, certificates of conformity for fruit and vegetables and imports of veal.

The original statutory instrument obviously envisaged a departure date of the end of March, but, as Members are fully aware, a decision was taken to delay our departure to 31 October. The primary aim of this statutory instrument is to make simple corrections to the existing EU exit SI, to ensure that, where provisions refer to a transitional period, those periods are realised as was intended.

Current EU legislation requires hops imported from third countries to be accompanied by an attestation certifying compliance with EU marketing standards.

For fruit and vegetables, EU legislation permits the inspection authorities of specified third countries to certify that imports originating from that country comply with EU marketing standards, so that they may benefit from lower inspection burdens in the EU. That legislation will be rolled over into UK law, and we are providing for a transitional period of two years for forms and certificates that we accept from third countries attesting that a product meets marketing standard requirements, during which both the new UK forms and certificates and their equivalent EU versions shall be accepted, provided that the EU standards remain at least as high as the UK standards. That will allow importers time to transition to using the new forms of documentation.

This instrument also concerns imports of veal. Under EU law, third countries wishing to import bovine meat into the EU must maintain an identification and registration system of the bovine animals they intend to import, starting from the day of birth of the animals. This is to ensure that imported meat has traceable origins and meets the EU's standards and that the age of animals whose meat is marketed as veal can be verified. The name and address of the body in charge of the system, with a list of operators for whom the body is carrying out checks, must be notified to the Commission before the first consignment of veal is imported.

These rules are being retained in our own EU exit SIs, with a requirement for third countries—including EU member states, which will become third countries when we exit—to notify this information to the Secretary of State. To safeguard the continuity of veal imports from the EU into the UK after EU exit, we have allowed a three-month transitional period, to allow the EU time to gather and submit the required information to the UK. The end dates for these transitional periods were explicitly stated as 29 March 2021 for hops and fruit and vegetables and 30 June 2019 for veal.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is important that the standards are maintained as we head towards 31 October, and many of my constituents will be concerned about not only the maintenance of those standards but also pricing. Can the Minister clarify the Government's policy on what tariffs the UK would place on EU agricultural goods coming into the UK if, in the event of no deal, the EU placed tariffs on UK agricultural goods?

George Eustice: The hon. Gentleman raises a point that is somewhat outside the scope of these regulations—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. For clarity, it is totally outwith the scope, and we must remain within the scope.

George Eustice: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As I was saying, the end dates of these transitional periods were explicitly stated as 29 March 2021 for hops and fruit and vegetables and 30 June 2019 for veal. However, the extension of article 50 to 31 October would render those transitional periods significantly shorter, or in the case of imports of veal, completely redundant. This statutory instrument preserves the original transition period that was intended.

The instrument makes further amendments to the Common Organisation of the Markets in Agricultural Products and Common Agricultural Policy (Miscellaneous

Amendments) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 in order to correct inconsistencies in the drafting and minor inoperabilities. The instrument under debate relates to reserved policy areas. However, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has engaged the devolved Administrations on its approach to CAP legislation under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, including on this instrument, to familiarise them with the legislation ahead of laying it. I commend these regulations to the House.

3.8 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): It is just like old times—we are back considering SIs, and it is good to see the Minister back in his place. I see Ministers rather like basketball players: they come and go, and they keep substituting for one another. On the Opposition Benches, there is a bit more consistency, and we tend to stick it out.

It is important that we have this opportunity to revisit the legislation. I do not know whether this is the amendment of the amendment, or the amendment of the amendment of the amendment—we have had so many of these SIs, and we have amended them and debated them thoroughly. It would be interesting to know where and when these mistakes arose, who found them and why we did not get it right earlier; perhaps the Minister will be able to say a few things about that.

It would also be interesting to know whether this SI is part of the process of evolution we warned there would be. Clearly, the EU does not stand still; some of these changes are inevitable, because the EU has made policy developments and we need to amend our legislative framework so that, when and if we drop out, we have clarity about the basis on which our law will be taken forward. Although this is secondary legislation, it matters, because this sector will be the most affected by no deal and, more particularly, whatever happens as a result of what goes on at the end of this month.

I have some specific questions for the Minister, but first let me say in passing that it would be nice if we were spending this time on the Agriculture Bill, which disappeared in November 2018. We have now spent nearly a year waiting for it to come back. I see these debates as like sticking the tent poles up in a gale when someone has forgotten the canvas. It would be nice to know where the canvas is, because we are going to get rather wet without it, given what has been happening outside with our weather and so on. It is important that we know where that Bill has got to.

I was impressed by some of the amendments tabled to that Bill by the Minister, along with the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith). We thought they were excellent. Sadly, they seem to have disappeared. It would be nice to know whether the Minister still believes in those amendments. Certainly, if he and his colleague do not want to move them, we will, because they would provide actual protections. That is highly relevant to this SI, which is the most straightforward—dare I say it; we have some more difficult ones to come. We have rather a lot of time to spend on it, so we might as well spend it creatively and appropriately.

I am not sure in which debate I said this, because we have taken part in so many and we conflated a number of SIs, to the benefit of the Government. We did not have to do that, but clearly, with 500 Brexit-related SIs,

[Dr David Drew]

of which more than 120 were DEFRA related, we had to do something to address the time restraints we faced and to do the job as well as we could. We warned that mistakes would be made because of the hurried way in which we went through this process—and mistakes were made. It is not without concern that farmers still face a great deal of uncertainty.

Clearly, this is the least contentious of the four SIs we will consider this afternoon. The other three are fairly straightforward, but we nevertheless have some concerns about them. This one is less of a concern, although I raised some worries about it previously and I will raise them again, because I am not sure we got the answers we would have liked to hear.

It is interesting to know that the regulations correct minor details, although the Minister rightly mentioned the impact on both the meat trade and vegetables. With that specifically in mind, a lot of the changes are about giving the Secretary of State all responsibility. It is important that we understand that. It is deliberately aligned, with the Government and the Minister being directly responsible. However, I do not understand why some of the references have been changed in the way that they have been. The Minister may want to explain that. Clearly, if the changes are purely to correct drafting errors, I will accept that, but some seem to change the responsibility even more, so that the Minister, and the Minister alone, is the responsible agency.

I have one very specific question, which I hope the Minister is able to answer. I am interested in why the olive oil and table olives sector, and likewise the silkworm sector, and interbranch organisations in the olive oil and table olives sector and the tobacco sector, were removed from this piece of secondary legislation. I do not understand why they were in the first or second draft—I think we are now on to the third draft.

On funding, although this is all about pillar 1, it has an impact on pillar 2. We had those debates; I just wonder where the Government are in terms of their philosophy on direct payments, which they want to remove. We do not yet have an agriculture Act in place to do that, so no doubt we will have to fall back on the current funding arrangements, presumably for the whole period of the transitional arrangements, which the Minister says could be up to two years. Unless the Government have sufficient resources, that will impact pillar 2. I always worry that money is filched from pillar 2. It would be good to know that the Government are clear that they will maintain enough payments in pillar 2. I know that is more pertinent to the second SI we will debate, upon which rural development regulations are contingent. It would be interesting to know whether the Government will put on the record that they intend to protect pillar 2 payments as a priority.

The other issue I want to raise is about monitoring and evaluation. The relatively new Secretary of State—everyone is relatively new, because we have had such a change in personnel—when asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan) about the office for environmental protection, which of course would be in place if we got the environment Bill enacted, acknowledged that there will be a gap in provision and that that will lead to some difficulties. I am not at all sure who is going to do the monitoring and evaluation. We talked about maintaining standards of imports

from EU countries, but who will maintain the standards of our current produce? Unless there is an authority that is able to do that, we will have a significant problem identifying whether our standards, let alone the standards of what might come in from abroad, are maintained.

The Opposition, at least, have always argued that there is a shortage of people to do those jobs, because they have gone into Europe and may not have come back—I do not know what the current employment situation is. I know we have all these additional civil servants, but there is no guarantee that they have the right skills to do this sort of work. Sadly, there has been a decline in agricultural science under this Government. Clearly, the people who are going to do this sort of work will need scientific training, because it is about trying to maintain the quality of the products we are discussing.

There is a lot in the draft regulations, even though, as I say, this is the most straightforward of the SIs we will deal with this afternoon. I hope the Minister is able to say a few things about it before we get on to our slightly more detailed scrutiny of the other three SIs.

3.18 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The amendments before us are ones for delay. Three years and three months have passed since we decided to leave the European Union. Leave voters would have expected us to have left at the two-year mark and to be well into enjoying the benefits of our independence by now, particularly in the agriculture and fishing sectors, where it is so much easier to design policies that would be better for domestic production and consumers than those they replaced.

I rise just to tease out a little more why the Government think we need a further 21 to 24 months' delay in putting through policies that should clearly be better, because they would be fashioned in the United Kingdom with United Kingdom consumers and farmers in mind. I would like the Minister, who knows his subject very well, on behalf of the Government to exude a bit more optimism and confidence about our ability to govern these areas better and to try to reduce that time.

What transition can we not do today? What have we failed to do in three years and three months that we will be able to do, miraculously, from 1 November onwards? I find it difficult to understand what these things are that could not have been prepared already. Indeed, knowing my hon. Friend the Minister I suspect that they had been prepared already, because he is knowledgeable and assiduous, and a great deal of work has gone in. Before we automatically allow these things through, I do think we need a better explanation of why we need to have more than five years elapse from the point where many of us said, "Yes, we can do better. Yes, we can have more home-grown food. Yes, we can have more environmentally friendly agriculture. Yes, we can look after our animals so much better if we have UK rules. Yes, we can have a better international market in food if we can get down the tariffs on food from outside the EU." These are all great bonuses of Brexit, and all we get today is, "Why don't we waste another 21 to 24 months?" Please, Minister, cheer us up.

3.20 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I will speak to all of the instruments at once, given that they are really part of a whole.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I appreciate that the hon. Lady is being straightforward in what she has just said, but I am afraid she cannot speak to all of the instruments at once. They are being taken separately. There is provision, quite often, to take these matters all at once, and the occupant of the Chair will say, “Everyone may speak to everything at once”, so it is not the hon. Lady’s fault for assuming that she might be able to do that, but I am afraid that it is a pretty strict rule. She has to speak only to the first one, and then later she can speak to the second, and then later to the third and then later to the fourth.

Deidre Brock: Those joys await me. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. You would almost assume that the instruments have been split just to fill the time while the Government are off playing in the delights of Manchester. But that would be very cynical of me.

I find myself on my hind legs again talking to statutory instruments that will be necessary as part of the eye-wateringly enormous effort to replace the sensible functioning of the European Union with domestic legislation that seeks to do the same thing. In the bonkers Brexit boorach, this all makes sense to someone, somewhere. I cannot help noticing, however, that if the Prime Minister’s cunning plan had succeeded and Scotland’s Court of Session had not reeled him back in—something that of course the UK Supreme Court agreed with—this place would be empty now. None of us would be here and the very important pieces of legislation that the Minister has brought to us today would still be sitting in a DEFRA drawer somewhere. Well, that is the optimistic view; they would more likely be headed for the shredder, with all the rest of the legislation that was being dumped on Prorogation.

We still await the return of the Agriculture Bill and the Fisheries Bill, as well as the environment Bill in this portfolio and scores of other pieces of legislation in other areas, all of which we have been told are needed to keep the UK functioning after Brexit. We have been told by, in my view, the worst Prime Minister in living memory that Brexit day is a mere 30 days away, come hell or high water, deal or no deal, give him ditches or give him death, but we have only these pieces of secondary legislation now, and the other pieces of secondary legislation and large chunks of primary legislation that we have been told so often are necessary for the proper functioning of the UK post B-day are still missing.

It would seem that this Government are determined to rip the UK out of the EU on Halloween, but do not give a flaming flamingo about getting the shop ready for opening day. For sure, there has been a very expensive advertising campaign telling everyone else to get ready, but the UK Government have stood steadfast too long in their refusal to prepare themselves, and we are now looking at a disaster of the Government’s making, while they insist that we are walking out that door no matter what. This legislation should have been prepared and presented a long time back, along with all the other pieces that should have been presented in an orderly fashion. Instead, it comes bundled on the back of a Prorogation that never was, half-formed and very late.

The Government are not prepared for Brexit, as was pointed out in the Brexit Secretary’s letter to Michel Barnier recently. I particularly appreciated his remark that “there will be insufficient time to complete such work if left until the last days of October”,

as if there currently exists an enormous reservoir of time to do all that should have been done in the last three years. This Government appear to be just getting around to noticing what is coming. I hope that it will not be too long now until they realise what it means. I have to say that I have a great deal of sympathy for the civil servants who must be working flat out trying to get some sense of order into the chaos, because they appear to be getting absolutely no guidance from the politicians who should be pointing the way—led by donkeys, indeed.

So to this statutory instrument, and I will shorten my contribution at this point, Madam Deputy Speaker. On this particular one, the substitution of the role is largely to do with the timing and such things and it is relatively minimal. I will speak at some length on the pesticides instrument and to a degree on the CAP one later, but I will end my contribution at that point.

3.26 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate.

In April I was elected to this place in a by-election. I know that many colleagues across the House spent a great deal of time in Newport West and, in doing so, will have had the chance to see our city centre, our housing estates and our productive farming industry. In fact, the current Prime Minister, soon after taking office in July, made a visit to Newport West. Sadly, he did not ask me for a tour because there is plenty I would have shown him, but he will have seen for himself the need for his Government to do right by our farmers, and not to play fast and loose with their livelihoods and with our local and national economy.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) for committing Labour to doing the right thing by our environment, our farming industries and agriculture more generally, and, importantly, for leading the fight in holding the Government to account when it comes to our departure from the European Union. This set of statutory instruments and all other relevant pieces of business require serious consideration by this House. We need thoroughly and comprehensively to take these issues apart to ensure that we get the best outcome possible for all of us across the UK.

I echo the shadow Secretary of State, who has been very clear that Her Majesty’s Opposition will not allow the crisis that is Brexit to be used as an excuse to reduce or weaken our environmental and public health protections. In fact, we want to maintain and enhance this country’s record of high standards and scientific excellence in the months and years ahead. I do not want to see chlorinated chicken in our shops, or hormone-fed beef in our butchers’, and nor do the people of Newport West, Wales or the rest of the UK.

Whatever happens, we need to ensure that our farmers avoid extra costs and businesses avoid greater burdens. We need to save jobs and protect our livestock, trees and plants from pests and diseases. We can do that by being sensible and realistic about the time pressures. The right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) was known for her red lines and look what happened to her. I do not want red lines and an unrealistic timeline to mean that the same happens to farmers, plants, animals or trees in Newport West or anywhere else in the country. I am hugely concerned by the reckless

[Ruth Jones]

speed at which this minority Government—we should not let them forget that they are a minority Government—are pushing through the EU exit legislation without proper consultation, few, if any, impact assessments and wholly inadequate legislation. I have been here since April, but it is evident to me that the legislation we are discussing now was an afterthought for the Government. They did not want to be here this week, and when this House flexed its muscles and stood up to the Executive, the Leader of the House chose legislation that he hoped would allow his colleagues to stay in Manchester rather than sit here in the House.

As each day passes, we get closer to the edge. A no-deal departure would be catastrophic for the food and drink sector in Wales, Scotland, England and Northern Ireland. Let us be clear: the longer the uncertainty continues, the longer the sector suffers. Farmers in Newport West rely on a steady and dependable stream of European Union funding and need the time and space to prepare for the future. The same goes for our businesses. Investment will not come until people have a better idea of what the future will look like.

John Redwood: Can the hon. Lady say whether she disagrees with the statutory instrument? I have not heard her provide any analysis of it.

Ruth Jones: As I proceed, I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will see what I am saying.

It is not just in Wales, but in other parts of these islands. We need only look across the Irish sea to the island of Ireland. Farmers, manufacturers and traders in Ireland and Northern Ireland are gravely concerned about the actions of the Government and what any Brexit deal may or may not mean for them, their livelihoods and their communities. As we discussed in the House last night, that is made far worse by the lack of a devolved Government in Stormont. I am not speculating or scaremongering: the fears felt across these islands were confirmed in the Government's Yellowhammer documents.

Like many hon. Members, I am disappointed to see that all the time put in by Members on the Agriculture Bill appears to have been for nothing. The illegal Prorogation of Parliament by the Government has meant that good and important legislation has fallen, so I hope that the Minister will confirm that the Government intend to carry the Bill over if Parliament is prorogued—legally, this time, of course. A strong, comprehensive and authoritative Agriculture Bill would safeguard the nation's food supply at a time when food poverty is on the rise and food bank reliance is ever increasing. The Government's Bill was a starting point, but we must go further and do more. I hope that the Government will bring forward amendments to the Bill to prevent our farmers from being undercut on quality and price by imports that are produced to lower environmental and animal welfare standards than here in the UK. These are hugely important issues, and I am happy to continue fighting for farmers in Newport West over the coming months and years.

3.31 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): It takes a certain ingenuity to come up with new things to say about some of these statutory instruments, especially as I spoke at

length about this one the last time we saw it. On Thursday, I stayed to listen to the Leader of the House and he took great relish in reading out the titles of the statutory instruments in what was a bit of a performance. But this is not a game. The details in the regulations that we have in the European Union have produced unparalleled food safety in this country—far better than the food safety that pertains in the United States—and exemplary environmental protections. We need to have SIs that are accurate and fit for purpose to make sure that we do not lose that food safety and environmental protection when we leave the European Union.

I have a series of questions for the Minister. How many SIs are still to be corrected before we can be sure that the safety of agricultural products we import will not be compromised? How will we know whether we have found all of those SIs? In answer to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), I have to say that while I would very much like us to grow more food in this country—I have mentioned broad beans—and there are various food groups where we could grow more of our own, I do not think we have time to grow a fully formed olive grove in Wokingham before 31 October. We will still need to continue to import food.

How can we be sure that all the other SIs are now fit for purpose? What will happen to all the SIs that are planned for next week if Parliament is prorogued again? If the Government are convinced that we will have a deal, why are we making preparations to leave without one? Can the Minister tell us whether he believes there is any likelihood that the House would vote to leave the EU without a deal, because I do not think there is? If we are going to leave without a deal, how can we support our agriculture and fisheries without passing the Agriculture and Fisheries Bills, which got so far before being shoved on to the backburner? I am sorry to have asked all those questions, but the fact is that I and this side do not believe that we are going to be fully ready to leave the EU on 31 October.

3.34 pm

George Eustice: The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) seemed to criticise the fact that we have these four SIs before us this afternoon and indicated she felt it might be a way of filling time. But I thought she and all the Opposition parties wanted to be here to scrutinise issues relating to EU exit and that is exactly what we are doing this afternoon. However, I share her commendation to our civil servants. The teams who have been working on this and all other SIs have worked incredibly hard over many months.

I want to address the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood). I think that he and I are not as far apart as he suggested in his contribution. He will probably recall that I resigned from the last Government on 28 February precisely because I did not believe it was right to extend article 50 and delay—I believed that that would lead to a sequence of events culminating in something of a muddle and the need to do exactly the types of things we are doing now.

My right hon. Friend must not confuse the transitional arrangements that we have discussed in relation to this SI with the rather oddly named implementation period in the withdrawal agreement that he will be familiar with. I will give him one example of the type of thing the SI provides for. Currently, it is possible, under EU law, for

the EU to recognise certification authorities in New Zealand, so that people can certify that apples they are exporting from New Zealand to the UK meet our standards. That reduces the need for us to carry out automatic checks on those apples when they arrive at a UK port. All the SI does is enable those existing certifications to carry on for that period of two years, giving people time to continue to trade—I know he is a great supporter of free trade, particularly with our Commonwealth friends—in that two-year period without having to apply for a new UK certificate.

I turn now to the points made by the shadow Ministers. On those made by the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), in general, the primary purpose of the SI is to extend the transitional periods to reflect the fact that the departure date has moved from the end of March to 31 October. That is the primary purpose, but as I said there are one or two other areas where there were very minor mistakes. He asked for some examples. In one case, the term “appropriate authority” was used, when it is clear it is a reserved matter, so we should have used the term “Secretary of State”. It is a minor error. The legislation as drafted probably would have worked but, given that we were revisiting this anyway to change the transitional periods, it seemed a good opportunity to put that other error right.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of olives, olive oil, silk worms and tobacco. It would not have been the end of the world if that had remained in the SI but, again, given that we needed to return to change the transitional periods, it seemed a matter of good housekeeping to remove those references where they were not appropriate. We would never have to recognise a producer organisation for the purposes of those sectors since we do not produce olives, olive oil, silk worms or tobacco, and as the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) pointed out, there is very little prospect of us doing so. In earlier SIs, we deleted similar provisions for home-grown UK bananas, because on a similar analysis we decided that was unlikely in the foreseeable future. This simply follows the same logic in those additional areas.

The hon. Member for Stroud raised several other issues about the Agriculture Bill and pointed out that I had tabled many amendments. Indeed, I made great use of my freedom as a Back Bencher to table some amendments. He will be aware, however, that now I am back at the Dispatch Box, I agree with collective Government and support a collective Government position. That is why those amendments have mysteriously disappeared.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of marketing standards and asked whether we have the enforcement capabilities for that. I can confirm that we have. We have Her Majesty’s marketing inspectorate, which sits within the Rural Payments Agency and which already does all the work involving marketing standards on behalf of the European Union, and the UK had its own horticultural marketing inspectorate well before we even joined the European Union.

On the issue raised by the hon. Member for Ipswich, a number of statutory instruments that are currently before the House have undergone a sifting process to correct minor errors but in general to ensure that the SIs that were laid before March remain relevant for a 31 October departure date. He is, of course, aware that the European Union (Withdrawal) Act provides for subsequent SIs after we have left, if it is simply a question of correcting minor errors of the sort that I have mentioned today. He will also be aware that there is provision for an emergency procedure should that be necessary.

I hope that I have managed to address most of the points that have been raised. I commend the regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Common Organisation of the Markets in Agricultural Products (Transitional Arrangements etc.) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 24 July, be approved.

Exiting the European Union (Agriculture)

3.41 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I beg to move,

That the draft Common Agricultural Policy and Common Organisation of the Markets in Agricultural Products (Miscellaneous Amendments) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 24 July, be approved.

This statutory instrument concerns the common organisation of the agriculture markets, more commonly referred to as the CMO. As I said earlier, in March this year six EU exit operability SIs concerning the CMO were debated in the House, approved and made. They applied operability amendments to retained EU regulations which set out the overarching framework for the CMO and the detailed rules contained therein. This instrument amends some of the existing SIs to make simple corrections ensuring that when provisions refer to a transitional period, in common with the previous SI, it can be realised as intended, notwithstanding the delaying of EU exit until 31 October.

Five different transitional periods are set out in the existing EU exit SIs. The first and second concern special provisions for the import of wine and the labelling of imported wine. Under EU law, third countries wishing to import wine into the EU must produce it in accordance with specified oenological practices, and are required to provide key information on the content of the shipment, including a certificate evidencing compliance with EU rules and an analysis report. Those rules are being retained through retained EU law, but we are only retaining oenological practices that relate to domestic wine production.

We are also amending wine labelling rules to make them more appropriate for the UK market. For example, we are requiring certain information to be written in English whether or not it also appears in another language. However, we are providing for a transitional period of 21 months, consistent with that in other labelling provisions, during which wine that is labelled in accordance with current rules and produced in accordance with oenological practices authorised under EU law may be imported into the UK for marketing to ensure that there is no disruption to the import of wine from the EU. During that period, we will also accept EU forms and certificates from third countries alongside the new UK certificates.

The third and fourth transitional periods concern labelling for packages of fruit and vegetables, and for beef and veal. To ensure that consumers are not misled, for some products labelling changes are required primarily as a result of our no longer being a member of the EU. The terms “EU” and “non-EU” will be removed as options for describing the origin of the products, and pre-packaged fruit and vegetables will need to be labelled with the name and address of a UK seller after we leave the EU, rather than the information about an EU seller. We have introduced a transitional period of 21 months to mitigate the effects of these labelling changes on business.

The final transition period concerns import documentation for hops. Current EU legislation requires hops imported from third countries to be accompanied by an attestation certifying compliance with EU marketing standards. We are rolling over this legislation into UK

law and providing for a transitional period of two years for documents that we accept from third countries, including the EU—which is about to become a third country—attesting that imported hops meet marketing standards requirements. During those two years both the new UK forms and certificates and the EU versions can be accepted, provided that the EU’s standards remain at least as high as those in the UK. This will allow importers time to transition to using the new forms of documentation, while ensuring that we accept only produce that is assured to meet UK standards.

In the original SIs, in common with the previous one we debated, the end dates of the transitional periods are explicitly stated as a specific date. For example, a transitional period lasting two years is expressed as a

“transitional period ending 29th March 2021”.

However, the extension of article 50 to 31 October means that we need to change the legislation to ensure that the intended period of transition remains in place. Therefore, the instrument under debate now makes a simple amendment to the existing EU Exit operability SIs so that the transitional periods apply for the duration intended.

The instrument also makes minor amendments to a series of other domestic EU exit SIs relating to marketing standards, the horizontal CAP legislation and the rural development programmes in order to remove ambiguity and inconsistencies, or to simply correct typographical errors. This instrument relates to areas of devolved competence. I can assure the House that we have consulted extensively with the devolved Administrations on its content and have received their consent to lay the SI. I therefore commend these regulations to the House.

3.47 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to be here for the second of our four statutory instruments. I want to push the Minister a bit further. He did not manage to answer one of the things that I slipped into the first SI. What is the process of accountability? As we do not have the Environment (Principles and Governance) Bill enacted, we do not yet have the office for environmental protection. I ask again politely what and who is going to provide the sort of testing regime that is now talked about in these five conflated SIs? They are largely about wine—oenological; it is good to get that on the record. It is important that we know that someone somewhere will be able properly to scrutinise labelling and to test what is coming in. Currently, as far as I know, this happens seamlessly across the 28 countries, of which we are one. It will not be seamless when we have left because the wines that come from the EU will go through whatever process the Minister is going to explain to me in a minute.

I am not saying that at the moment there is a clarity because I, for one, do not know exactly how wine is tested to see that what people are buying is safe and what they think they are buying in terms of the proof and the quality, and that the labelling tells us what the wine is and where it came from so that people know what they are drinking. I just push the Minister politely to ask what process the Government have put in place for these interim arrangements?

I know this is about transition. Maybe we shall just turn a blind eye for a time, and let come in what comes in—although someone will have to account for the

tariffs, if and when we get to that stage, because the EU will put tariffs on our goods and services and we will put tariffs on EU goods and services. It would be interesting to know what the Minister has, through his Department, been able to do. Presumably, such work has been going on for the last n number of months, since we have been discussing all these statutory instruments. Following the delay—again we are at the final hurdle, or maybe not—the reality is that somebody somewhere must have this all ready to go from 1 November.

I politely push the Minister, given that we have not yet got the office for environmental protection, with all the different tentacles that it will have, to undertake such work. The response may be that we have our own Food Standards Agency, but at the moment a lot of that work is subsumed into that of the European Food Safety Authority, so someone needs to have this type of capability, and it would be good to know who, and when they will come into play.

3.50 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to appear after that crash of thunder, following the speech by the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew).

I refer hon. Members to my earlier remarks. Very little seems to have changed in the intervening period. The Minister mentioned that the intent was to retain only regulations that relate to domestic wine production. Does he mean wine made on these islands or domestic to the EU? If I heard him correctly, the UK Government are accepting the rules of the EU for wine production. Is that correct? Will the requirement to provide a UK seller for meat and other products, in addition to the EU's current labelling rules, actually add red tape to the UK's food market? It seems that we will in effect be accepting the EU's single market rules and adding a few UK rules on top. I am not sure how that is taking back control, but I will be delighted to have it explained.

3.52 pm

George Eustice: We rehearsed plenty of issues when we debated the previous statutory instrument, so I can be briefer, and I appreciate that both hon. Members who spoke have done so briefly.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), the Labour shadow Minister, asked who would do this work. The office for environmental protection, which will obviously be a matter for the new environmental Bill, would not do any such work. We are talking here, probably, about marketing standards and labelling standards, and the Rural Payments Agency has an inspectorate that leads on that work; it always has done, and has done so incredibly well.

The hon. Gentleman should recognise that the European Union does not have a directly employed army of inspectors in UK ports; the EU has a body of law, but UK agencies already do all such work. As he said, not only does the RPA monitor marketing standards, but there are other organisations as well. We have organisations that monitor pesticide residues; we have the FSA, which deals with food safety issues; we have organisations such as the Food and Environment Research Agency, which deals with plant health, and the Animal and Plant Health Agency, which deals with animal health.

The technical expertise is already here in the UK, in our agencies; indeed, that technical expertise is often relied upon by the EU, not the other way round.

Dr Drew: I accept that; many of our good people currently work for the EU. But is the Minister seriously suggesting that those people have carried out proper contingency planning on how they will do this monitoring in a month's time? How would FERA—how would the RPA, which I have significant doubts about; I do not know how many scientists it actually employs—sit down and do the work to see whether what has been imported is what it says on the label?

George Eustice: The regulations provide for a transitional period, precisely to give people time to adjust. We will be saying to European wine exporters that they do not, on day one, have to apply for a UK certificate, or get UK certification. We are saying, very generously—it is not being reciprocated particularly yet—to the European Union that because we want to prioritise continuity in the short term while people adjust to this new situation, we will recognise their existing certification.

To answer the hon. Gentleman's question, there are no risks and nothing new is going to happen that has not already been happening under EU law for a number of years. This simply creates that transitional space to avoid UK authorities having to do unnecessary administration in the short term, and to avoid exporters having to go through unnecessary administration in order to continue to trade.

Dr Drew: The Minister is being very generous in giving way. What then is to stop people labelling their cheap plonk as burgundy and sending it in the form in which they send their good stuff? How will we be able to tell that what we are getting is what it says on the label? I am really intrigued by this.

George Eustice: Well, as the hon. Gentleman will be aware, there is nothing to stop that happening now, apart from EU law. For 45 years we have relied on EU law being enforced in member states. We are simply saying that in the transitional period we anticipate that the EU will continue to abide by and enforce its own laws. If it becomes apparent that it no longer enforces its own laws, we have the powers in these measures to cease to recognise them, because we will maintain our standards.

In answer to the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), I can confirm that there are two slightly separate provisions on wine. First, we are bringing across only those provisions that relate specifically to wines that we produce in the UK, in relation to the production side. We have a growing and very successful wine industry, particularly in sparkling wines. We will not be bringing across those provisions for wines that we do not produce in this country and that are made in other countries. Secondly, we are making those labelling transitional provisions available to all EU producers so that there will be no short-term interruption in the administration procedures that they have to follow.

I hope that I have addressed the points raised by the shadow Minister and the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith. I commend the regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Exiting the European Union (Agriculture)

3.57 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I beg to move,

That the draft Import and Export Licences (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 23 July, be approved.

The purpose of this statutory instrument is to make changes to EU regulations governing the agricultural import and export licensing regime to ensure that they remain operable on our departure from the European Union. The instrument also revokes some obsolete and redundant regulations relating to the payment of export refunds in the dairy sector and on the administration of EU third country export quotas for cheese and skimmed milk powder.

I should point out that this instrument is rather different from the other three we are considering this afternoon, in that it does not relate to changes that are necessary due to transitional arrangements or dates. This is one of a small number of very minor SIs that were deprioritised in the run-up to the end of March, given that their applicability to the UK is quite limited and they were not judged to be sufficiently important to merit passing in time for the end of March. However, now that we have the luxury of time, it is possible to bring them forward.

This instrument seeks to make EU regulations governing the agricultural import and export licensing regime operable. In particular, the regulations make operability fixes to technical EU Commission regulations, providing for the issue of import and export licences for certain agricultural products; update EU regulatory cross-references to equivalent provisions in domestic legislation made under the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Act 2018; and convert licence securities from euro values into sterling using the average annual exchange rate for 2018.

EU Commission regulations 2016/1237 and 2016/1239 provide for a licence system for the import and export of certain agricultural products and specific provisions for the import of hemp. Under those regulations, it is required that any import of husked, milled or broken rice, raw hemp and hemp seed or ethyl alcohol be subject to an import licence. Likewise, any export of husked or milled rice is subject to an export licence. The regulations also provide for specific provisions in relation to hemp seed imports other than for sowing, including the pre-registration of importers and requirements to prove the destination of goods.

The purpose of those common agricultural policy licences is primarily to provide a means of monitoring agricultural markets by having advance notice of goods entering and leaving the EU. However, given improvements in data collection at the border, the Commission has increasingly relied on real-time customs data as a means of monitoring markets, which has negated the need for licences. They are now limited to just a handful of products, for specific reason. That is why these measures are of declining importance and were not prioritised for passing by the end of March.

For example, rice import licences really serve only as a means of applying the EU's variable import duty system, and hemp licences have been retained at the request of the directorate-general for migration and

home affairs, apparently to support EU drug policy, even though the information provided does not really contribute to that effort. This statutory instrument specifically amends Commission delegated regulation EU 2016/1237 and Commission implementing regulation EU 2016/1239, both passed on 18 May 2016, by replacing references to the EU with references to the UK and references to the EU Commission with references to the relevant UK authority. It replaces EU regulatory cross-references with references to equivalent provisions in domestic legislation already made under the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Act 2018 and converts licence securities from euro values into sterling using the average annual exchange rate for 2018.

EU Commission regulation 1187/2009 sets out detailed rules for the provision of export licences and export refunds in the dairy sector.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Can the Minister confirm whether the cost of administering these licences is counterbalanced by the licence fees that are paid?

George Eustice: My right hon. Friend will be aware that we have always had a clear principle in this country of aiming for full cost recovery on licences, and these licences tend to be focused on very large traders and importers.

The provisions relating to the payment of export refunds are now obsolete, as they relate to rules that existed before the entry into force of the current common market organisation regulation. Under current rules, export refunds can be paid only in the context of crisis measures. The provisions covering export licences relate to the management of EU-World Trade Organisation third country export quotas of cheese to the United States of America and Canada, and of skimmed milk powder to the Dominican Republic, under the economic partnership with the CARIFORUM states. UK access to those export quotas once we leave the EU is obviously uncertain, since we will no longer be an EU member, although negotiations with those countries over future tariff rate quotas are ongoing. The Government will bring forward new legislation to manage any future UK access to third country quotas should that be necessary in the future. As the regulations in question are effectively obsolete or redundant in a UK context, this statutory instrument revokes Commission regulation 1187/2009, of 27 November 2009.

This statutory instrument concerns only reserved areas of competence regarding import and export controls, but the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has engaged with the devolved Administrations on its approach to CAP legislation under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, including this instrument, to familiarise them with the legislation ahead of its being laid. I therefore commend the regulations to the House.

4.5 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): In rising to respond, at least I have the satisfaction of knowing that we have not debated this measure before. I have been trying to find the one that was the missing thread among all the ones we have debated. At least I have put my mind at rest, knowing that I have not missed this in the great mists of time.

I wish to pick up on a couple of things with the Minister. Paragraph 2.10 of the explanatory memorandum states:

“These technical amendments, designed to provide operability ‘fixes’”.

Is that a legalistic term? Is it a Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs term? Is it some other term? I know what it is trying to tell me but it is interesting that we talk about “fixes”. This is about trying to look at currency exchange, which is not unimportant, because one reason why British farmers have done less badly is that they have been paid in euros up to this moment in time. That has meant they have done slightly better, because the euro has risen in value against the pound. So there will be some “losers” here in the sense that they will not have that security and protection.

That was just an interesting comment, but now I come to a genuine question. It is about the way in which, certainly through the transitional arrangements, export refunds will be paid. I accept that they will be paid in pounds, but does this refer both to the UK farmers receiving exports refunds and to EU farmers, who clearly at the moment will have seen this as a seamless operation? It is not now going to be, because it could be occurring in the context of a hard border. These are important aspects. The Government decided that this was not worthy of any priority whatsoever, but it is an important issue about currency conversion, because that can and does mean that the way in which payments are made can be beneficial. That will not be the case in the future because payments will always be in pounds. I would welcome the Minister’s clarification and willingness to look at the economic consequences of that, because in the short run at least British farmers could stand to lose out because of it.

4.7 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The explanatory memorandum points out that there is little impact from this statutory instrument, yet here we are. The Minister also said that it is not very important, but as it is about imports and exports, will he tell us whether tariff requirements will change some of the provisions in it? Has DEFRA done any analysis of how the licence regime will impact on businesses exporting and importing agri-products? What costs will industry have to bear?

4.8 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, let me thank the Minister for bringing this measure forward. In his introduction, he said that powdered milk was one of the products he is referring to. My constituency has a large number of agrifood companies, which depend on their export and important licences. One of them is Lakeland Dairies, which employs some 270 people in my constituency and is involved in the milk product coming in as a liquid. It has two factories in Northern Ireland and two in the Republic of Ireland—the company is in a unique position. I am encouraged by what its chief executive officer, Michael Hanley, has said, which is that whatever happens in this process of Brexit, be it a deal or no deal, we have to work with it. I am glad when the CEO of a major company has that attitude and that interpretation of what is happening.

Along with the approximately 2,500 agrifood sector jobs in Mash Direct, Rich Sauces and Willowbrook Foods, my area also has a number of farmers who feed

into the process. I wish to talk particularly about the farmers who feed into Lakeland Dairies. Mine is the second-highest milk-producing area in the whole of Northern Ireland—second only to East Antrim—and we have a high-quality product and a number of committed farmers. I declare an interest: I live on a farm. It is not a milking farm—it is not a dairy farm—but my next-door neighbour takes the land and milks it, and I suppose that is ultimately used for dairy. My neighbours depend on the process being easy to take forward. The milk product provided by Lakeland Dairies comes across the border, the powdered milk goes back across the border to the Republic of Ireland, and it then comes across once more in a processed form, because of the way the factories do it down south. Ultimately, the product is packaged in Newtownards in my Strangford constituency and then sent overseas.

The former Minister for exports, Liam Fox—I cannot remember his constituency—was responsible for ensuring the export of the product from Northern Ireland, and ultimately from the Republic of Ireland as well, to China. He secured a contract for £250 million over five years. We are eternally grateful to him and his Department for ensuring that that happened, but I want to make sure that everything goes forward in the right way.

Earlier, the Minister said—I think I caught what he said correctly—that his Department had contacted the regional Governments. Unfortunately, we do not have a functioning Assembly; I presume that contact was made with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, which is the equivalent of DEFRA over here. Has that contact been made, and has contact been made with the Ulster Farmers’ Union, which represents the majority of the milk producers throughout Northern Ireland? Indeed, has contact been made with the likes of Lakeland Dairies and others that depend on the powdered product and the milk product that cross the border on a number of occasions? They are high-quality, great products.

Finally, with special reference to daily export, is the Minister aware of the onerous added administrative burden? Is there not only support but funding to help with an interim change over a period? My local company has a number of questions, and I have written to the Department. To be fair, I think the Minister met the company—indeed, I remember the day that he did—on a separate occasion when he had a different responsibility. I just want to make sure that Lakeland Dairies, an integral economic factor of progress in my constituency of Strangford, can retain the jobs it has. We need to ensure that the milk producers can feed into the process and that, when it comes to import and export licence regulation and those companies that create so many jobs and so much in the economy, we can make my constituency of Strangford a stronger economic base for that, so that everything will be in place for them.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): For the record, the constituency was North Somerset.

4.13 pm

George Eustice: Let me turn first to the points made by the shadow Minister. He highlighted the use in the explanatory memorandum of the term “fixes”, which he even put in quotes marks. In DEFRA, we like to fix things that are broken, and the truth is that in this case, as in many other cases, it was always recognised that

[George Eustice]

simply to bring across retained EU law would require changes for the purposes of operability. The types of fixes that are commonplace throughout this instrument and all the others simply replace the words “European Union” with “UK” or replace the European Commission as the competent authority with the relevant authority in the UK or with the Secretary of State.

The shadow Minister mentioned the issue of export refunds for dairy, which links to a point that was made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Let me say that, when it comes to these export refunds, we are simply deleting provisions that have already disappeared from EU law, so we are revoking something that became redundant and obsolete anyway under EU law in—I think—2007.

EU thinking on export refunds has evolved in recent years. There is a general consensus that they can be used only in extreme circumstances—when there is a particular crisis—and there are other provisions in law to enable that to happen. Therefore, they would not be able to be used anyway, because the other associated legislation that would enable us to do that does not exist, so this measure is really little more than a good housekeeping measure.

The point raised by the hon. Member for Strangford goes somewhat beyond the scope of the measure, but I will touch on it briefly. Let me reassure him that the Government are absolutely fully aware of the problems that the Northern Ireland dairy industry in particular could experience in a no-deal scenario. It is the case that it exports around 30% of its liquid milk to be processed in Ireland. That would be a problem if there were a requirement for export health certificates, or, indeed, if full tariffs were applied. It would also be a problem for those cheese processors in the Irish Republic, who would no longer have their supply of milk. Obviously, we hope that this is something that can be resolved through negotiation, but I can reassure him that we are working very closely with DAERA in Northern Ireland to identify all sorts of contingency arrangements and interventions that we would instigate if they were required.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for that explanation and for all the hard work that he does in his Department. It is good to see him in his place doing things that he did

in the past and doing them well. It is important that the Republic of Ireland is aware very clearly of the benefits of having a good working relationship with Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom. It is for the mutual benefit of everyone: for the mutual benefit of the other producers; for the mutual benefit of the factories; and for the mutual benefit of the workers.

George Eustice: I could not agree more. There is a mutual interest for all EU members and the UK to reach a sensible resolution to the current discussions. That is why the Government are redoubling their efforts to try to get a sensible withdrawal agreement with that backstop deleted and alternative arrangements put in place instead.

I turn now to the point raised by the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), which also links to a point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight). I am aware that my right hon. Friend has raised with me this issue of cost recovery and charges in a different context, which I am looking into. However, in this particular context, I can confirm that it is licence security that is offered, and it is returned once a licence is utilised within the specified criteria. There are no costs to operators if they use the licence as specified and therefore no economic implications. The hon. Lady should be aware that the impact assessment highlights the fact that any costs would be well below the threshold of £5 million, but I hope that, in this additional information, we are talking here about a licence security that is returned. She must also bear in mind that we are doing nothing that is not already currently done. As I know that she and others would ideally like us to remain in the European Union, she would face those costs anyway. We would be forced to have those costs and would never have the chance to be able to repeal them should she want to. We, at least, as a country about to become a properly independent, self-governing country again, would have the opportunity, at a future date, if we felt it necessary, to repeal these particular provisions and save everybody the bother.

I hope that I have been able to address the points that have been raised, and I commend these regulations.

Question put and agreed to.

Exiting the European Union (Pesticides)

[Relevant document: *The Twenty-seventh Report of the European Statutory Instruments Committee, HC 2264.*]

4.19 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I beg to move,

That the draft Pesticides (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 17 July, be approved.

Plant protection products, or “pesticides” as they are commonly called, are currently regulated by means of two European Union regulations: Regulation (EC) 1107/2009, which concerns the placing of plant protection products on the market, including the approval of active substances, authorisation of pesticide products and management of associated risks; and Regulation (EC) 396/2005, which sets maximum residue levels of pesticides in or on food and feed of plant and animal origin, and measures to ensure compliance with those limits.

Earlier this year, two EU exit statutory instruments were laid before this House to convert those EU regulations into operable national law: the Plant Protection Products (Miscellaneous Amendments) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019; and the Pesticides (Maximum Residue Levels) (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019. Those two EU exit statutory instruments, in common with many others, made the EU regulations operable in a national context by, for example, transferring functions from EU institutions to national authorities.

This further instrument, which we are considering today, is comparatively minor and simply takes forward some additional amendments that are required to ensure that the regime can continue to operate effectively. First, in common with two of the other SIs that we have considered today, the change in exit day from 29 March to 31 October necessitates that we amend certain dates in the retained law that were based on the original date for EU exit. Secondly, further new EU legislation has come into force during the extension period, after the plant protection products and the maximum residue levels EU exit SIs were finalised. The new EU legislation needs to be corrected following the same approach as in the other SIs. Finally, this instrument fixes some errors within those earlier EU exit instruments, which I will cover later.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): For the avoidance of any doubt, will the Minister confirm that there is no measurable impact on business as a result of the regulations?

George Eustice: Yes, I can confirm that, in the sense that all the draft regulations are about continuity—an approach to ensure simply that where authorisations are carried out and decisions made by the European Commission, they will in future be made by the Secretary of State or the relevant authority.

Some amendments are required as a consequence of the change in our departure date. The plant protection products EU exit SI in particular contains a number of transitional measures that apply until specified dates. Those dates have been updated in common with the approach in other SIs. Given that exit day is now 31 October, those transitional provisions would allow much less time to adjust than was originally intended.

This instrument therefore replaces dates that were calculated from the original exit date with a specified period of time after exit.

The draft regulations also deal with new EU legislation that has come into force since the original EU exit SIs were produced. The plant protection products and the maximum residue levels EU exit SIs converted active substance and MRL regulations into a new national register to give effect to the provisions in a national context. The EU regulations themselves were no longer required and therefore revoked. This instrument deals with new EU regulations that have come into force since then, and we have taken the same approach. Some outdated EU regulations have also been superseded or replaced, and those have now been identified as redundant, so they can be revoked.

This instrument also contains transitional provisions relating to grace periods for the withdrawal of active substances under EU regulations, so that they are carried across unchanged into our national law. Finally, this instrument also fixes a number of technical errors that were made in the earlier EU exit instruments. The vast majority of those were very minor in nature. However, I should draw attention to the fact that it came to light that the earlier plant protection products EU exit SI erroneously removed some provisions on endocrine disrupting chemicals. That omission was purely unintentional and this instrument therefore corrects that error.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I am glad that the Minister has admitted that this error took place, but the Department has had to bring forward about 80 or so SIs over the summer. Has it conducted a review to ensure that similar errors have not been made in other legislation or are we are going to see a repeat of this situation, with other last-minute amendments?

George Eustice: Well, a point was made earlier that this has been an extraordinarily huge task of converting a highly complex body of EU law across into national law. When the EU (Withdrawal) Act 2018 was passed, it was even envisaged that there may be circumstances where there were errors, omissions or oversights. The hon. Lady will be aware that that Act makes provision for SIs to continue to be made in the event of errors occurring. I deal closely with the team of civil servants who have been working on this legislation, so I know that they have a huge amount of technical knowledge and have drafted the instruments we have been discussing today to the best of their ability to ensure that they have covered everything. But there can be difficulties if a last-minute update contained in particular EU document that is needed to make a particular element of EU law operable is not noticed; sometimes these things will come to light. The important thing is that we are clear about what we are trying to achieve, which is continuity, and that we put things right when they arise.

This instrument was originally submitted under the negative resolution procedure. We subsequently accepted a recommendation from the House of Commons sifting Committee that it be upgraded to the affirmative procedure and debated in the Chamber today on the basis that it includes a provision that relates to the charging of fees. In practice, this measure simply removes a redundant EU provision that clarified that member states could charge. The instrument does not change the existing

[George Eustice]

fees and charges relating to the pesticides regulatory regime, nor does it have any effect whatever on the UK's future ability to charge fees or make changes to the current fees. That relates to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), who I know is very concerned about these issues, but I hope that I have assured him that this changes nothing about the existing charging regime.

We have worked closely with the devolved Administrations—as we have on all the other measures we have discussed today—to develop this instrument, and they have consented to it being made on a UK-wide basis. I therefore commend it to the House.

4.27 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): This is the most controversial of the four SIs that we have dealt with today, and we had a forthright debate on this subject previously in Committee. Much of that debate was about the theme I have been pushing today—that is, questioning the process of oversight and accountability.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Pesticides Action Network have both contacted me to demand that the Opposition scrutinise what the Government are saying and doing, so it was at our behest that this instrument was moved from the negative to the affirmative resolution procedure. In fact, we were tempted to vote against it on the basis that the Government need to explain better and to be clearer about how they intend to carry through—not just legislatively, but practically.

As I said earlier, this is about dissecting the parts that we have played as an integrated constituent partner within the EU, and how we begin to pull away. Two of our major agencies—the Food Standards Agency and the Health and Safety Executive—will be involved in this process. The HSE will almost certainly be responsible for testing the measures. It is therefore important that we know from the Government what they intend to do and how they intend to do it.

The RSPB and the Pesticides Action Network made six points. First, there is the loss of oversight checks and balances for a significant consolidation of power within an agency that, as such, does not exist at the moment. That is why I referred to the FSA and the HSE, because they are certainly going to have to be responsible for this in the short run. Secondly, there is the weakening of the requirement to obtain independent scientific advice that I referred to previously. Thirdly, there is the weakening of other standards. Fourthly, there are the important parts of the regime left unclear or with detail to be filled in through guidelines. I accept that this debate is partly about trying to clarify further where we might be in terms of those guidelines, but it is not yet absolutely clear what is going to happen. Fifthly, there is the loss of capacity and the lack of investment in the stand-alone regime. Again, I keep referring to that. Finally, as I have said and they confirm, there are the mistakes that were made in drafting these SIs on a previous occasion.

In the previous debate, the Minister's predecessor, the right hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), gave me some assurances. However, this is a work in progress and not necessarily something that has yet been completely nailed down by the Government.

It is really becoming very important. I am still not clear what has happened to the REACH—registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals—directive, for example. This will be a very major part of what the REACH directive, as constituted when it comes into UK law, then entails, because pesticides, or plant protection products as they are properly referred to, will be an important part of what it is properly accountable for. I would welcome the Minister saying something about that. The chemicals division of the HSE has 150 people because it is largely operating within the framework of the EU. It will not be doing that after 31 October, so it will be important to know exactly how this is going to be constituted in a different format, given that we still do not have the environment Bill enacted.

There are other concerns that are important at this stage, to reiterate what I said in Committee, cost being one of them. The Minister has presumably looked at who is going to pay for this, because it will potentially be more expensive when we have a stand-alone regime.

Kerry McCarthy: I share my hon. Friend's concerns. One of my concerns is that the Government may seek to recoup some of these costs, or to make savings, through the weakened requirement to obtain independent scientific advice. As I understand it, the measure now says:

"The assessing competent authority may obtain independent scientific advice where it considers it appropriate to do so."

That is quite a bit weaker than the current requirement where it says that it "shall" obtain advice. That may be one way in which the Government would seek to save money.

Dr Drew: I thank my hon. Friend. That is one of the things we waxed lyrical about in the previous incarnation of this debate where we looked at "may" replacing "shall" and "must". That gives—dare I say it?—a degree of wriggle room about how this is going to operate. This really does need sorting out by the Government because it will be too late if we get to this stage in a month's time and it is not at all clear what is going to happen. This matters, because farmers need clarity.

I read today the report on the ban on neonicotinoids. I do not pretend to understand everything in it, because I read it quickly, but it was quite interesting. It looks at some of the scare stories put about that neonicotinoids would lead to a dramatic reduction in sugar beet and other products, whereas that does not seem to have been the case initially. We need to know what pesticides will be allowed and who will scientifically adjudicate on their safety. Will we have a different regime? We could choose to ban glyphosates, which the EU decided not to do, largely at the instigation of British MEPs. That matters to not only farmers but every gardener, because most of us have Roundup in our sheds and, if we are ever going to dispose of it as a potentially hazardous product, we will have to think about how to do it.

These debates are crucial, and this one has a more far-reaching impact than any, so we have to ensure that we get this right. It would be interesting to know from the Minister whether this is the final time we will consider this; what mechanism is now in place, whether it be the HSE working with the FSA or, eventually, the office for environmental protection, which presumably will encompass those two agencies when it comes to

these products; and the detail of how we are changing the process of looking at the scientific basis of how we deal with these products, which are potentially quite hazardous but which farmers would argue are crucial to the way they carry out their business.

4.36 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I will start by saying how grateful I am to the Minister for his praise of independent countries as the way forward in our previous debate. I look forward to his support for Scotland deciding its own future.

This instrument is the one where an opportunity was missed. All of us will have received the briefing from the RSPB, which sets out how the SI fails to address issues with pesticide regulation, but it is worth laying them out a little, so that they are on the record for future battles.

Oversight will be lost and power centralised. The new system will see new DEFRA Secretaries having a great deal of say over what is considered appropriate. That power should be devolved, so that the devolved Administrations can consider the best interests of their nations and agree common frameworks where appropriate. Gone will be the requirement to consult the scientists, allowing those who say, “Experts—who needs them?” to have a free hand for dismantling sensible safeguards. That is a bad thing. We have seen the damage caused by disregarding experts.

The revocation of EU regulations on pesticides without corresponding safeguards being introduced seems another exercise in flinging caution to the wind. I hope that it is not part of the abandonment of the precautionary principle signalled by the previous DEFRA inhabitant, who also trumpeted the freeing up of genetically modified organisms and associated practices as one of the supposed benefits of Brexitannia. This SI also leaves big chunks of the regulatory landscape barren, with the future to be mapped out in guidelines rather than legislation. That is likely to leave regulators flying by the seats of someone else's pants.

Pesticides, fertilisers and genetically modified organisms will be the touchstones of future battles on food safety, and this marks a reduction of our protections, which does not bode well for the future. It does not bode well either for protecting our food against low-quality imports. Can the Minister give us a guarantee here and now that hormone-pumped beef and chlorine-washed chicken from the US will not be allowed on to our supermarket shelves?

We will return to these battles time and again, no doubt. This instrument, like the others, will be passed today. Ironically, they represent the first points on the board of this Prime Minister's time in office and they were written for his predecessor's Government.

4.39 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Whatever the risks to food safety and to agricultural producers and retailers from any errors in the other SIs we have debated, which deal with markets and import and export licences, they are massively enhanced by the risk of errors in any SIs pertaining to pesticides. This SI amends serious errors in the previous SI and gives us no confidence that there are not errors in other SIs dealing with regulations from the European Union that protect our health and our environment.

I am not enough of a lawyer to know whether it makes any difference to somebody who wishes to try to get away with an increased residue of 1,4-dimethylnaphthalene that it was identified in the previous SI as “1,4-dimethylnaphthalene”. However, other errors clearly would have allowed the use of dangerous pesticides, dangerous quantities of pesticides or inappropriate applications of pesticides if they had not been corrected by this SI. I direct hon. Members to regulation 6(4), which reverses the erroneous omission of provisions of annex 2 to regulation (EC) 1107/2009.

The problem we have is that, given the long, convoluted and dry naming of all these SIs, it is extremely difficult to identify where the errors are, but they are really important. In this case, if it were not for the correction in this SI, we would not have been able to prohibit the approval of active substances, safeners and synergists with endocrine-disrupting properties. Endocrine-disrupting properties have a significant effect on animal and human health.

If there are similar errors in other SIs, there is a real risk that we may open ourselves up to unhealthy reduction of our safeguards as part of negotiations to achieve a trade deal with the United States, where we know environmental health and human food safety take a back seat to profitability—in particular the profitability of the United States' own producers. Our food safety and health, and the health of our environment, should not be up for negotiation. We have a real fear that, if we leave without a deal, there are other SIs that will open us up to that danger.

4.42 pm

George Eustice: On the final point raised by the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), I addressed the issue of errors previously. Bringing across these statutory instruments is a vast undertaking; it is inevitable that there will be a few errors, and the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 made provision to deal with those even after exit. I explained very clearly that there was a simple oversight in the case of endocrine disruptors in that particular statutory instrument.

I want predominantly to address the issue of oversight, which was the principal concern raised by both the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), and the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). It is important to recognise that the UK has always been recognised as the leading country in the European Union for chemicals and pesticides expertise. The chemicals regulation division within HSE is the driving force behind most of the EU working groups that consider issues with pesticides. Through those working groups, we provide our technical expertise to the European Union; it benefits from our technical input. Yes, there is a role as well for the European Food Safety Authority and the European Chemicals Agency, but we should not underestimate the incredible technological and technical expertise we have in this field.

In addition to the CRD, which sits within the Health and Safety Executive, we benefit from advice from the expert committee on pesticides, which is a panel of leading academics with knowledge in this area. We also have an expert committee on pesticide residues, which assesses all the evidence on both imported and home-grown foods to look for trends in breaches of maximum residue limits. When we leave the European Union, all the

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existing methodologies for assessing pesticides at a European level will be brought across, including the so-called end points—that is, the thresholds that are applied—and the precautionary approach. Indeed, the key regulation, 1107/2009, was largely drafted by British officials based in the CRD. So we will be bringing all that across in the first instance.

The idea that there will no longer be technical or scientific assessments is a misunderstanding. I am told that, in the vast majority of cases, where “shall” is specified in the EU regulations in the context of requiring scientific input, it remains as “shall” in the UK ones. I think there are one or two minor areas that do not relate to the requirement for scientific input but relate more, as I understand it, to the methodology and the requirements on particular organisations or bodies. There, it is not appropriate to convert “shall” in the same way, as we do not have to have exactly the same institutions and organisational structure that the European Union has to carry out those effective scientific assessments. However, I reassure hon. Members that we will continue to have scientific assessments, that science will continue to lead all our decisions on pesticides in future and that we have some of the best technical expertise in this field. I hope that I have been able to provide reassurance on that point. Obviously, the main purpose of this particular statutory instrument is to change the dates for the transition.

Question put and agreed to.

PETITION

Freewheelers’ use of bus lanes

4.46 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): The petition is from Park Hall women’s institute, Walsall, who are residents of the United Kingdom. The petitioners are concerned that the Midland Freewheelers, who transport blood, x-rays, tissue samples, platelets, breast milk for premature babies, chemo drugs and other emergency medical supplies across Birmingham and the Black Country on behalf of the NHS, are not permitted to use designated bus lanes when transporting these emergency supplies. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to consider allowing Midland Freewheelers to use designated bus lanes so that essential emergency supplies can be delivered without delay. There are 45 signatories to the petition.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of the residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the Freewheelers is a voluntary organisation which transports essential supplies across the Birmingham and the Black Country as requested by the NHS and notes that the Freewheelers are not permitted to use designated bus lanes.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to consider permitting Freewheeler volunteers to use designated bus lanes to ensure that essential health equipment and materials can be delivered quickly.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002525]

South Western Railway

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

4.48 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Ind): I thank the Speaker for having granted this debate. I recognise that the performance of South Western Railway is not a new subject, rehearsed as it was in this Chamber by the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) less than a year ago and as it has been repeatedly in general debates touching on rail issues.

For those of us unfortunate enough to be served by the franchise, it is a repeat customer to our postbags and our inboxes. It is an aggravation every single time we set off from our constituencies to this place, not knowing whether the train will be delayed, overcrowded, with functioning heating or air conditioning, dependent on the time of year—one can usually rely on the air conditioning in November and the heating on full blast in July—or, indeed, whether it will arrive at all. Those served by more minor stations—shall we describe them in that way?—all too often see late trains hurtling past, making up time by not stopping at all.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), who cannot contribute to this debate but is here to listen enthusiastically, has asked me to remind the House that Gosport is still to this day the largest town in the United Kingdom with no railway station, so her constituents are obliged to find their way either to Portsmouth by ferry or to Fareham by bus to access a still substandard service.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I discussed my intervening on the right hon. Lady beforehand. The fact that multiple trains fail at the same time causes massive delays, but South Western Railway's communications do not highlight that online, so people are left unaware of the difficulties until they reach the station and then it is too late to make alternative arrangements. Surely if it is any sort of a rail business at all, South Western Railway has a responsibility to its customers who deserve to know in advance what is going on. Does she agree?

Caroline Nokes: I do agree with the hon. Gentleman, who has highlighted one of the many problems, which is the lack of information. We all understand that problems on the network can cause trains to be delayed, but in the 21st century providing information in advance can enable passengers to work out a different route. Sometimes such information is simply not forthcoming. I well recall being at Southampton Airport Parkway station and buying a ticket for a train that the member of staff knew had already been cancelled, and I was then expected to take a convoluted route to get to Waterloo. Had he told me at the point of purchase, I could have simply got back in my car and driven to this place.

I want to start by giving credit where credit is due. Last Thursday, I returned from this place to Southampton on a train which ran ahead of time. That was a novelty. I wonder if it was a coincidence that it occurred a day after Mr Speaker granted this debate. Perhaps one should be granted every week and Mr Speaker has magical qualities of which we were previously unaware.

It helped to strike up many a happy conversation among travellers when we stopped at Woking for a full five minutes, so far ahead of schedule was the train running. Oh, to have that driver again: truly his marvellous skills could be deployed on many a route across the network.

I would also like to give credit to the train staff who are in the main unfailingly polite and even jolly, sometimes in the face of extreme adversity, lack of information—as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned—and understandably bad-tempered passengers. But that is where the compliments cease.

I do not want my hon. Friend the Minister to think that I have come here just to whinge. I have not. I am seeking the opportunity to air the legitimate grievances of my constituents, but also to offer some constructive suggestions as to how the improvements identified as part of the Holden review might be encouraged in some instances, in order to improve the passenger experience.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Some of the railway's services come to Bristol, although it is not the preferred route for getting to London as it takes so long, so I appreciate the right hon. Lady's concerns. One group of passengers most affected by unreliable services of the types she describes are those with disabilities. It is easy to say that if information is made available passengers can change routes, but people with disabilities have to plan their journeys well in advance and it causes huge disruption for them if they cannot rely on the service.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Lady for making that point. It may try her patience, but I will come on to the issue of disabled passengers at the end of my remarks. A constituent of mine has been in touch about a terrible experience he had on a train from London Waterloo to Basingstoke. As a disabled passenger, he was trapped on the train and unable to make alternative arrangements, and he had a distressing and dreadful experience.

I am concerned by the circular firing squad we sometimes see between South Western Railway, Network Rail and the Department for Transport. At times, all can appear keen to blame and turn on each other, when perhaps they might do better to establish a constructive relationship with clear accountability, instead of the obfuscation and fudge we have at the moment. It is not only in this House that we achieve more by working together.

I shall move on to the specifics of where it still seems to be going wrong. The independent review commissioned by my right hon. Friend the previous Secretary of State for Transport, and chaired by Sir Michael Holden, reported over a year ago now, making a number of important recommendations. This is perhaps a good time to consider those recommendations and allow my constituents the opportunity to reflect on the progress they think has been made. It is also a good time to pose questions to my hon. Friend the Minister about what oversight he has of the progress of South Western Railway against those recommendations, which particular ones he regards as the highest priority, and what sanction he might consider imposing if there is not adequate improvement. As I indicated earlier, SWR has had a year since the review, and the patience of my constituents—if not the Minister—has run out.

[*Caroline Nokes*]

I would like to highlight in particular the frustrations regarding overcrowding. Of course, I welcome the additional trains introduced following the timetable changes in May, but there is a nagging suspicion that this has been achieved by pinching carriages from other services. As my constituent David Willey explained to me, the most significant change on the service he uses has been the reduction in capacity by 17% from 720 seats in 12 carriages to 600 seats in 10. This has meant he has had to stand in his carriage usually two mornings a week.

Barnaby Wilson of Chilbolton let me know that he could not remember the last time his commuter train in or out of London was not short-formed and/or late. He comments on the regular occurrence of a 10-carriage train running with just five, thus halving the capacity at rush hour. And we all know the consequences: people crammed in like cattle, standing for the entire journey, or forced to wait for the next train as they simply cannot get into the reduced number of carriages.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Ind): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful case on behalf of her constituents. When the service gets further up the line, shortened carriages cause even more problems, for constituents in Wimbledon and elsewhere. SWR promised to address this in its franchise bid, and we should now be reviewing that and asking whether it will be held to account.

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. As my constituents pass through places such as Wimbledon, they see that no one is able to get on those trains.

As one constituent put it to me, the only change he has noticed in SWR's service is a further deterioration, from a very low base: short formations, broken trains and stations being skipped, and delays continue unabated. As he correctly points out, if SWR publishes a revised timetable the evening before the service is reduced, there is no recourse to Delay Repay unless the service deviates from the newly published timetable. He describes it as a consumer rights void that he would like the Minister to address.

I would like to ask about the way transport strategy is joined up. Ian Dickerson of Romsey assured me that his preferred route from Romsey to Waterloo was to drive to Sunbury and then join the rail network on the Kingston loop to Waterloo, thus saving over £50 a week in tickets and parking costs, but undoubtedly adding to emissions on our road network. It is simply not a green solution.

One of the recurrent themes from constituents has been that SWR's predecessor, South West Trains, had its moments, as they put it, but most of the time ran a robust, if no frills, service. If anyone in 21st century Britain regards functioning wi-fi as a frill, let me tell them that SWR has not even managed that. The passengers I sat across from yesterday commented in amazement that the wi-fi was working for once—right up until the point it wasn't.

The consensus is that this performance is a breach of contract between company and traveller, and there is a suspicion that the Government have been duped by a provider promising what it simply cannot deliver. SWR won the contract providing more seats and services and

it has produced neither. The 442 shambles has meant there are now fewer seats and services. The promised new rolling stock has not yet arrived. It was promised by the end of this year. That clock is ticking and passengers are watching closely. Peak-time payers suspect they have been sacrificed on the altar of winning a contract and left with the old SWT trains, where the promised refurbishments seem to have come to a grinding halt. It is far too simplistic to say we should renationalise—that is not the issue. The Department was sold a pup and needs to work out how to hold SWR to account against the Holden review challenges.

The final comment I have from a constituent is about the provision for and the treatment of disabled passengers. We all know there was an extremely hot spell during the summer, when rails got very hot and there were challenges right across the network. I am tempted to comment that it coincided with my hon. Friend's arrival in the Department for Transport, but I do not blame him for train conditions that were in some instances hotter than hell. But rail services run better in countries that are a great deal hotter than the UK ever gets in July and without the same level of chaos.

My constituent, a wheelchair user trying to return home via Andover, was advised at Waterloo to get on a Basingstoke train, as most other trains had been cancelled. With SWR assistance, he boarded a Basingstoke-bound train that was about to depart. Once he was onboard, it became apparent the heating was stuck on in the carriage and passengers were told to move forward, but my constituent was in a wheelchair; he was trapped. By the time the train arrived at Clapham, only a few minutes down the line, he was in serious medical difficulty, but he remained trapped in the carriage, as it was too far off the platform. He was in carriage nine, and we are all conscious of the shortness of some platforms at Clapham. No help was forthcoming from train or station staff, and it was only because another passenger intervened by preventing a door from shutting—literally putting his foot in it—that a medical emergency was averted. My constituent was seconds away from calling 999. However, the event prompts us to ask why the rolling stock is so antiquated that it had the maximum heating on the hottest day of the year, and why SWR staff at Waterloo helped my constituent into a carriage when there was an immediate announcement that the heating was stuck on.

Finally, let me return to the recommendations of the Holden review, and how SWR can be held to account for any failure to deliver. If Network Rail does not fulfil its obligations it can be held responsible by the Office of Rail and Road, which, in November 2018, took formal action to ensure that it would deliver on the recommendations in the review. However, SWR is accountable only to the Department for Transport, so I respectfully remind my hon. Friend the Minister that it is up to him to ensure that it delivers. May I ask him how robustly he intends to do that?

The medium-term recommendations are all due to be completed by the end of this year. There are 12 of them, ranging from ensuring the competence and training of controllers to ensuring that there is adequate provision of CCTV on platforms to assist with the dispatching of trains. Crucially, the review identifies the misalignment of incentives. It recommends that by the end of the year, the non-aligned objectives of Network Rail and South Western Railway should be dovetailed to ensure

that the two organisations are pulling in the same direction at the same time—rather as we might expect a train engine to do. I simply ask my hon. Friend what steps he is taking to make sure that that actually happens, so that he may avoid having to return to the Chamber time and again to listen to what currently appears to be a tale with no end in sight for the poor passenger from my constituency who will pay just short of £6,000 a year to be subject to a sub-standard service.

5.1 pm

Anne Milton (Guildford) (Ind): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) for securing the debate. It is timely, and I am fortunate enough to have a few more minutes than I expected in which to make some remarks.

The performance of South Western Railway is of ongoing concern in Guildford. It causes people frustrations and at times considerable anger. My constituents are not asking for an exceptional service, although they pay fairly exceptional fares. They would rather settle for a reasonable service; that would be sufficient. However, like my right hon. Friend, I want to praise the staff at the stations and on the trains. Many of them do an excellent job, often with no more information than the passengers, and sometimes in very difficult circumstances. I also want to associate myself with my right hon. Friend's comments about those travelling with disabilities, who face even more harrowing journeys. I am pleased to see that there is some more seating at Guildford station, but that took a long time to achieve.

Late trains, missed stops, overcrowding—I have previously got into some trouble with my comments about my rail journeys on Twitter, and where I have ended up sitting. The Minister is nodding; he will possibly remember this. In particular, I commented on the fact that the seats designed for three people were adequate only if all three of the people occupying them had average-sized bottoms. If anyone has a more than average-sized bottom, they do not really work for three people.

The overcrowding is really shocking. When a train is late and there have been last-minute platform changes so that people have to rush to another platform and then find themselves sitting on the floor, or squashed almost on to someone's lap, that is not acceptable. Insufficient information is probably one of the things that turn frustration into real anger. People do not know what is happening. There are a number of options for those living in Guildford—they can get out at Woking and share a taxi—but they may not know that the train will not start again for half an hour, or that they will have to change trains. Further problems are high fares and the fact that not enough ticket offices are open at peak times.

Lastly, I must say a word about the Solum redevelopment of Guildford station. I will not take too much time. The redevelopment of the station is welcomed by everybody. Everybody wants the station redeveloped. It is being done under the umbrella of Solum—an association between Kier and Network Rail, but nobody likes the plans that have been passed by the borough council. I believe that they went through on appeal. It is extraordinary that when the development was in its planning stages, the website did not at any time mention trains. It was simply about the station.

Constituents of mine are suspicious. They see it as an opportunity to increase revenue. There would be a fantastic opportunity at Guildford station if the plans were moved by simply 3 feet. That would allow sufficient resilience in the service. If something went wrong there would be a platform 0 that could be used. I urge the Minister—as I have urged Ministers before and urged Network Rail—and urge Kier to look at this. I know why they are nervous about reopening this planning application, but we will throw a party for Network Rail and Kier in Guildford near the station if they will be reasonable and reconsider this plan.

The Minister is looking hopeful, so I look forward to being able to invite him to that party. I have had numerous meetings with South Western Railway and Network Rail, and on every occasion they are nothing but helpful. They assure me that services are getting better and they explain the problems, but we are at the end of our tether. Ministers must act. The high fares that people in Guildford pay are acceptable only if there is a reasonable service.

Caroline Nokes: I thank my right hon. Friend for her comments. She says that high fares are acceptable only if there is a reasonable service. I received two comments from Guildford constituents on Twitter when they heard that this debate was occurring. One of them, Philippa, tells me that 2% of her trains this year have been both on time and in the correct formation. Scott, who travels into Waterloo, says that he has had one train on time in two months, over seven hours of delays, and four out of the last six trains cancelled. Does my right hon. Friend agree that her constituents are simply not getting a reasonable service for the price that they pay?

Anne Milton: They most certainly are not getting a reasonable service. I know Scott well. That is seven hours of his working time. The cost of rail delays to constituents and to businesses is significant. We have talked about wi-fi. We could go on and on. People cannot even work on those delayed trains. I urge the Minister not to just read out his speech. I am sure that he has a speech ready. I am sure that he will have taken note of all the comments that have been made today. We need him to act, to thump the table with the operators and Network Rail and make sure that the concerns of my constituents and those in Romsey, Gosport, Wimbledon and any other constituency that is represented here today are taken note of and acted on so that by the end of the year we are starting to get messages from them highlighting the improvements that have been made.

5.8 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): I thank Members who have contributed to this interesting debate this afternoon. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) on securing the debate and for the opportunity to discuss this important issue in the House. She mentioned in passing Mr Speaker's magic touch—her train appeared early the day after he granted this debate. As my right hon. Friend knows, Mr Speaker can work in mysterious ways. She also mentioned my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinéage) possibly having in her constituency the largest town without a railway station.

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

The hon. Member for Daventry might have a competition with her on that, because the main town in my constituency does not have a station, either. *[Interruption.]* It is not good enough, obviously, but there are plenty of towns that do not.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): And Leigh in Greater Manchester.

Chris Heaton-Harris: And Leigh in Greater Manchester, I am informed by a terrible heckler from a sedentary position, suffers the same.

The current operational performance of South Western Railway for the period 18 August to 14 September, measuring arrival time to within five minutes at the final destination, was 82.9%. That is the common measure used by the rail industry. Using the measure that we, as a Department, now like to use—being on time within a minute—for the first quarter of this year performance was 59.7%. That is clearly not good enough.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North knows that we are a relatively new ministerial team in the Department, and when the Secretary of State came into the Department he set out his priorities for improving the railway. He is absolutely determined to work with the rail industry to deliver a more reliable, passenger-focused railway.

Stephen Hammond: Those are appalling statistics, but the Minister is absolutely right about a customer-focused railway. He must bang the desk of Network Rail, because a number of those failures have been signal failures, such as those which we experienced on the line yet again yesterday. When he bashes South Western Railway, will he please also make sure that Network Rail is brought into that attribution, and make sure that it recognises its responsibilities to customers?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I completely hear what my hon. Friend says. I promise to take up the mantle on this issue. It has not been lying still on the table—I can also promise that.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Anne Milton) informed the House that her constituents just wanted their rail service to do simple things—run, and be on time. I think that is a fair expectation. Maybe have enough room for three bottoms on some chairs as well, but basically that is it. I do regularly look at the various sets of statistics for the things that my right hon. Friend mentioned. I know that the Guildford ticket office has caused great concern to Guildford customers, and I do know, because I was warned by previous Rail Ministers, that the Guildford station platform 0 option is a matter of great contention locally, but I have not formally looked into it. I will ensure that I do, if that is okay as an offer to my right hon. Friend.

My Secretary of State's vision is that the industry must make innovative changes to make the trains run on time, all of the time. South Western Railway agrees that its general performance is not yet up to the standard that it would like, and that its customers expect.

Around 70% of the delays and cancellations that affect passengers result from problems with the infrastructure, which is down to Network Rail, as my

hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) identified. Overall, Network Rail will spend around £48 billion nationwide on maintaining the network over the next five-year period, running from this year until 2024, and the Wessex route has seen a 20% increase in its funding compared with the previous five-year period. This funding should see more maintenance and a huge uplift in the renewals, to increase reliability and punctuality for passengers, but I know that it has not been delivered yet.

The train services provided by the South Western franchise are relied upon by 600,000 passengers every day. The train operator, South Western Railway, runs around 1,700 services each day on the network. The latest figures published show that 110,000 passengers pass through Waterloo station during the morning peak. It is a very, very busy network.

People are rightly frustrated and angry about the level of delays and cancellations that they are suffering, and I personally am sincerely sorry that that performance has reached this level—to the extent that we are having to hold this debate again on the Floor of the House. This has not happened overnight; sadly, the service has been deteriorating since about 2011-12. The Department for Transport has been working closely with South Western Railway and Network Rail to try to ensure that the causes of the problems are identified and understood and that there is a plan to turn performance around.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North referred to Sir Michael Holden's review of South Western Railway and Network Rail's performance on the Wessex route. The review was commissioned by the previous Secretary of State to ensure that everything was being done to understand and address the causes of the downturn in performance on the route. Sir Michael made 28 recommendations for improving performance. Some of them could be implemented in the short term and others will take longer. He was clear that there is no silver bullet and that it will take time to restore performance to acceptable levels, and that is our highest priority.

Sir Michael's recommendations cover a range of disciplines, including performance management, train operations, infrastructure maintenance and renewals, and control and resourcing. He also suggested a number of infrastructure changes that could be made to improve the service. SWR and Network Rail are documenting their progress and sharing a copy of their "tracker" with the Department each month so that we at the centre can see how they are progressing. I can assure my right hon. Friends that we are monitoring it very closely.

Caroline Nokes: I welcome the fact that the tracker is being shared with the Department, but does my hon. Friend have any plans to share it more widely with Members of Parliament from across the south-west who are hearing the same levels of frustration in their postbag?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I asked my officials the very same question before the debate, and currently there are no such plans. However, I am sure that we can have a conversation afterwards and perhaps get to the stage where we do not need a humble address or anything too exciting to get the information.

Sir Michael has also been retained by SWR and Network Rail to review their progress. He has confirmed that 16 of his 28 recommendations have already been delivered to his satisfaction, including key infrastructure changes and relaunching SWR's approach to performance management. I understand that he is due to return to check on progress in November.

A range of recommendations were made on performance management. SWR and Network Rail have established a joint performance improvement centre at Waterloo to focus on the critical areas of delivery across the infrastructure and train operations, and that is key to understanding what is actually happening and, more importantly, what can be done to prevent delays. I have an outstanding invitation to be shown around the JPIC, and I would be delighted if my right hon. Friend, and perhaps other Members, joined me to see at first hand how the executive teams at SWR and Network Rail are tackling the performance issues. I will happily arrange for my office to have the invitation extended if that is suitable—it seems like it could be a date.

Other areas of progress have seen £3.5 million invested to redesign the SWR control centre arrangements and create an industry-leading set-up to improve train performance. As part of that work, SWR is implementing enhanced decision support tools and improving training and competency management systems for controllers—lots of long words, but they refer to unbelievably important things that are going on. SWR is reforming its control centre operations, recruiting more people to improve decision making and providing information to customers during disruption. I heard very loudly indeed the complaints about communications to passengers. I have seen the complaints about communications—just type “SWR” into Twitter and have a cursory glance. The point is well made and well understood. Improving the control centre operations is a crucial part of improving performance and, ultimately, providing a better service to customers.

Other progress is being made to mitigate the biggest causes of delays within SWR's control. It has introduced an innovative scheme that employs paramedics to work at the key London stations that are most impacted when people fall ill, and it has made significant investments in suicide prevention measures to ensure that SWR is doing as much as it can to reduce the impact of these tragic events.

The national rail passenger survey results for 2018-19 show that SWR failed to meet the expected levels against all nine benchmarks, with only 83% of passengers satisfied overall with their journey. SWR is therefore being required to make additional investment in initiatives to try to meet the contracted levels within the coming year.

There are obviously occasional strikes on the network, which are causing disruption to SWR. I understand and share the frustrations of all users of South Western Railway services who are being unnecessarily inconvenienced by the action being taken by members of the RMT union. My Department has been clear that it wants to see more people, not fewer, working on our railways so that it can deliver more services for passengers. SWR's plans are completely in line with that. It will be employing more guards on trains in future, not fewer, and it has been clear from the outset that no one will lose their job and every service will continue to have a guard or conductor rostered to work. SWR wants to discuss with the RMT the method of operation of the

new trains, which may involve transferring the task of closing the train doors from the guard to the train driver on the new suburban trains that are due to be introduced in 2020. This is a safe, well established practice that has been in place on our railways for the last 30 years. The RMT currently objects to it. We do not think that is right, but I hope that there will be proper dialogue to overcome that situation.

Forgive me, Mr Deputy Speaker, for taking a bit longer than normal, but we have a bit longer than normal and I want to address properly the points that my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North raised on behalf of her constituents.

Overcrowding continues to be an issue on this franchise. Significant investment that has already been made has seen suburban network trains lengthened from a maximum of eight cars to 10 cars. In the very first year of this franchise, SWR completed the introduction of 150 more carriages when the class 707s were introduced. Where possible, mainline services have also been lengthened using the units that were freed up by the increase in the suburban fleet. We have also introduced more terminal capacity at Waterloo by fully reopening the former Waterloo International platforms.

SWR's plans for the franchise anticipated further capacity increases from changes to the layout of the existing fleet, the refurbishing and introduction of class 442 units, which my right hon. Friend mentioned, and the replacement of the entire suburban fleet with a new fleet of 750 carriages in Bombardier five and 10-car class 701 Avenra trains—an increase in the fleet taking it to almost 1,700 vehicles by the time that they are all in service. It is absolutely true, regrettably, that these projects are running behind schedule, but everything is being done to see those trains enter service as soon as possible.

Turning to the specific concerns of my right hon. Friend's constituents, Mr Willey and Mr Wilson, about short formations, I am aware that, following the changes to the May timetable, a safety issue emerged with the operation of the class 442 fleet, so the trains that had been introduced have been withdrawn until the problem—electromagnetic interference with a signal, so quite a significant safety issue—has been resolved. SWR and Network Rail are working as fast as possible to resolve it.

Caroline Nokes: The Minister has referred a number of times to things being done as fast as possible and the new fleet being introduced as soon as it can be. Can he give any indication of a timescale?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I can, and I will probably get to that in a minute, because I am going through this in some detail. I will also write to my right hon. Friend to clarify completely any points that I do not pick up on in my speech.

As I said, SWR and Network Rail are working as fast as possible to resolve the issue, but in the meantime, SWR has had to make some changes to its timetable and train plan to minimise the impact on passengers. I am pleased to say that Delay Repay 15 has been introduced on the franchise and the process for claiming compensation has recently been streamlined. That includes the introduction of automated Delay Repay in the case of advance tickets bought on the franchise's website and Touch smartcard season tickets.

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

I note the concerns that my right hon. Friend mentioned, on behalf of Mr Whiteman, about compensation when there is a revised timetable. Measuring entitlement against the revised timetable is an established feature of delay repay compensation policy; publishing a revised timetable is designed to help passengers plan their journey—she suggested that is a good idea—and thereby avoid delays where they can.

My right hon. Friend also asked, sensibly, about how transport strategy is joined up, citing the journey of Mr Dickerson as an example of an interesting multi-modal journey. It is of course for individuals to make decisions about what works best for their own circumstances. A train timetable has to be planned based on making best use of the capacity available to meet the forecast demand, especially at peak times. Network Rail regularly undertakes route studies as part of its long-term planning, to ensure that plans for investment in the network are developed and targeted at adding capacity where it is most needed. I am hopeful that as one of the results of the Williams review, which will come before this place in a White Paper later—we hope it will be this year—we will start to see the emergence a much more integrated system, of the type that my right hon. Friend envisages, rather than of the type that Mr Dickerson now takes part in.

All SWR trains are fitted with wi-fi, including the new trains that will arrive in 2020. By December 2020, an on-board media service of films, TV shows, magazines and games will be available on all mainline fleets.

Caroline Nokes: I think it is important to take the opportunity to press the Minister when I can. He makes the point that wi-fi is fitted—it is, but it simply does not work. It is complicated to log on to and it drops out frequently. Will he use all power to his elbow when discussing this with SWR? We know it is there, but make it better.

Chris Heaton-Harris: That discussion has already been had, so SWR is working with BT to install 31 new masts and upgrade 104 existing lineside masts to deliver better phone signal improvements for more than 90% of customer journeys. Full deployment of that will come in the next three years.

Caroline Nokes: Three years!

Chris Heaton-Harris: Full deployment of that will come in the next three years.

On the experience during the summer of my right hon. Friend's constituent who uses a wheelchair, clearly this situation was handled badly and is unacceptable. I had not heard of this particular case beforehand, although I follow these cases closely in my office. I used to be the chairman of the all-party group on learning disability, and I think accessibility on our railway should be and is absolutely a priority of a modern-day rail service.

Stephen Hammond: I am pleased that the Minister is touching on this point, because I wanted to raise it. Accessibility, both for people who are disabled and for young mothers and others, is a real issue. Major stations up and down the SWR network have failed to have that

step-free access implemented. I am thinking of places such as Raynes Park, in particular; currently, disabled people have to catch a taxi to Wimbledon in order to get on the train. That level of access is not acceptable.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I completely get the point that my hon. Friend is making, as well as those made by the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and a host of other points I have picked up on since I became the Minister of State with responsibility for rail. I can honestly say that we are looking at this as hard as we can. Obviously, it would be much more helpful if people were able to book in advance, and they are able to. I know from my commute home on London Northwestern that a huge amount of investment has gone into some software at Euston and 35 people work there to ensure that disabled people or people who need help to get on and off trains can book that help in advance and get on and off in the right place. The work is being done and it is extremely important to me and to all the franchise holders.

We are continuing discussions with FirstGroup about train service operations for the future great western franchise, which will start in April 2020. The hon. Member for Bristol East has left the Chamber, but she would be interested to know that the discussions include options for the heart of Wessex line, which was a route that respondents to the public consultation suggested would benefit from improvements in the frequency of train services.

As I said in my opening remarks, SWR agrees that its general performance is not yet up to the standard that it would like, that its customers expect and that we all would expect. SWR's joint performance improvement centre at Waterloo, which was established together with Network Rail last year, is focusing on performance improvement initiatives that should have a real impact on services. I look forward to taking my right hon. and hon. Friends to see it. SWR is working to reduce the number of incidents on the network to be more responsive to them when they occur. So, a whole host of things are going on to try to improve the situation for my right hon. Friend's constituents and all who travel on the SWR network.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Ind): Will the excellent Minister give way?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Well, the Minister will happily do so.

Steve Brine: I thank my constituency neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), for securing this important debate. One bit of homework that I would give to the Minister and the new ministerial team is on the issue of smart ticketing, and specifically on part-time season tickets. We had a commitment in the 2017 Conservative manifesto and, two years into the Parliament, the work is still outstanding. SWR's carnet product is not a part-time season ticket, and my constituents see through attempts to present it as such. Work patterns are different these days and people feel that they are paying a lot of money for a five-day season ticket that they do not need. I do not ask the Minister to respond in detail at this point, but if he would write to update

me on where we are with respect to that manifesto commitment on part-time season tickets, I and the good people of Winchester would be intensely grateful.

Chris Heaton-Harris: It would be a pleasure to write to my hon. Friend on those matters, and I think he will quite like the response he gets.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North and all Members who have taken part in this important debate. I have mentioned

that the service on this part of our railways is currently absolutely not good enough, but I have spoken about the many ways in which we are trying to make improvements and to eradicate the reasons for the poor standard of performance—but there is much more to do.

Question put and agreed to.

5.32 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 1 October 2019

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

Park Home Residents: Legal Protection

9.32 am

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. In the absence of the Member we hoped would be chairing the sitting, it falls to me as the only member of the Speaker's Panel present to take the Chair and to invite Sir Peter Bottomley to move the motion on my behalf.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): On a point of order, Sir Christopher. In view of the fact that the debate is starting just over two minutes late, are you, as the Chair, prepared to give yourself injury time?

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): I am advised that it is in order to give injury time for time missed.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered legal protection for residents of park homes.

Thank you for starting the debate, Sir Christopher. I hope I will soon be able to resume my place and that you—you were originally going to move the motion—will be able to pick up and give the speech the House is looking forward to.

May I first pay tribute to you, Sir Christopher, for leading the all-party group on park homes? This is one of those areas where, for far too long, there was too little publicity and too little Government action.

I pay tribute to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which looks after park homes, for the way it has picked up the initiative by Nat Slade, an officer in Arun District Council, and his colleagues, who have worked with the Ministry to get the Government to come forward with measures to deal with some of the appalling abuses. If I were a tougher Member of Parliament, I would name some of the rogues and crooks—some have left the park home business, but others continue. My belief is that, with publicity, they will be shamed into stopping the exploitation of some of the most vulnerable people in our communities.

Few people choose to live in a park home as their permanent residence if they have better options, but the fact is that many do not. Too often, people have taken on a home that is, in theory, licensed only for holiday use, but everyone, including the freeholder and owner and the operator, knows that they are there to make permanent use of it. If, by chance, the operator manages to get the licence changed to permanent, the innocent park home owners and residents are then told to pay a fortune to convert what was, in effect, a permanent residence into another permanent residence.

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

Sir Greg Knight: Is not one of the problems that, unlike purchasers of freehold property or those who take on the long lease of a flat, many park home occupants have not had the benefit of legal advice before signing up?

Sir Peter Bottomley: That is certainly true. Too often, the operator or owner has encouraged the park home resident to use a lawyer who works for or is recommended by the park home operator.

I shall now resume my place so that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) can start his debate.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I am grateful to you, Sir Peter, for moving the motion. I shall call Sir Christopher—it is his debate—but for the avoidance of doubt I should say that I am not late; I am the replacement.

9.36 am

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I hope that in due course you will be correctly described on the nameplate that currently refers to the missing chairman.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) for moving the motion and ensuring that we got under way as quickly as possible, and I thank you, Mr Hollobone, for coming along at very short notice to fill the vacancy.

I welcome our new Minister. When he looks back at his career many years hence he will recall that his first debate was one with procedural irregularities that, with a bit of help from the Clerk, had to be overlooked.

When this debate was selected, I had the privilege of being able to speak to the Housing Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey), who told me that she would have liked to be able to respond to the debate because the subject is close to her heart. She is, however, in Manchester doing a lot of other debates, but she said that in her absence her new junior Minister would be well briefed and able to respond, and she offered to meet me to discuss my concerns and said that she would attend an early meeting of the all-party group to discuss our concerns.

Sixty years ago, in 1959, Sir Arton Wilson produced a report for the Government that found that the legislation applying to people living in caravans was both unclear and insufficient. The Government's response was quick, enacting the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960. The Act stipulates that occupiers of land must acquire a licence from the local council before using the land as a caravan site. The Act defines a caravan site as,

"land on which a caravan is stationed for the purposes of human habitation and land which is used in conjunction"

therewith. Section 29 defines "caravan" as including,

"any structure designed or adapted for human habitation which is capable of being moved from one place to another".

Over the years the term "caravan" in relation to permanent residential accommodation has been replaced by the expression "park home". In law and practice, however, park homes—and mobile homes—are caravans. They are chattels rather than real estate. Section 1(1) of the 1960 Act provides that

"no occupier of land shall...cause or permit any part of the land to be used as a caravan site unless he is the holder of a site licence".

Section 1(2) provides that any occupier of land who

[Sir Christopher Chope]

“contravenes subsection (1)...shall be guilty of an offence”.

Section 3(3) provides that a local authority may issue a site licence only if

“the applicant is, at the time when the site licence is issued, entitled to the benefit of a permission for the use of the land as a caravan site granted under Part III”

of the 1947 Act.

Local councils have the power to refuse, revoke or impose limitations on a site licence if it is deemed necessary. The conditions that can be attached to such licences are set out in legislation. The most recent addition was the Mobile Homes Act 2013, a private Member’s Bill facilitated by my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) when he was Housing Minister, which was brought before the House and ably carried through to enactment by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), whom I am delighted to see in his place today. He used his place in the ballot to ensure that such an important issue would be the subject of private Members’ legislation in the absence of parliamentary time for Government legislation.

The 2013 Act contained a power for the Government to introduce a fit and proper person test for anyone applying for a site licence. That provision has been the subject of a recent public consultation, to which I am sure my hon. Friend will refer in closing. There has therefore been extensive and growing regulation of those who own or operate sites for residential park homes, but none of the legal protections afforded to residents of such homes by the 1960 Act and subsequent Acts applies if the site on which the park home or caravan is situated is unlicensed. The main purpose of this debate is to raise public awareness of that issue, and to highlight the failure of local authorities to enforce the requirement for site licences.

The unwillingness of local authorities to protect vulnerable residents is leading to a proliferation of unlicensed sites on which residents are at the mercy of unscrupulous site owners. The problem has become even more widespread because of recent controversial planning decisions that have enabled many caravan parks that were previously used and licensed only for touring and for non-residential purposes to be reclassified as year-round fully residential sites.

One such decision is that of 15 February 2018 in respect of two appeals against the refusal of Christchurch and East Dorset Councils to grant a certificate of lawful existing use for the permanent residential use of 45 caravans on land on the north side of Matchams Drive. At the time of the appeal, the site was subject to a licence granted to the Bournemouth and District Outdoor Club for use by touring caravans, but following the appeal decision the site is being developed and used for the siting of permanent residential caravans, despite no variation of the original site licence having been granted and without any transfer of that licence to the new owners.

Paragraph 49 of the appeal decision in respect of Matchams Drive, which is now being renamed Silver Mists, referred to the fact that the site licence conditions would protect infrastructure with respect to issues such as hard standing and drainage. The inspector said that the council retained control

“by virtue of the manner in which the licence is framed. This might include the need for planning permission for certain works, as set out in the licence”.

He went on to say, in paragraph 58:

“Trees on the site are the subject to a Tree Preservation Order...and that would apply irrespective of the outcome of this appeal.”

In paragraph 45, he stated:

“The site is secluded with a perimeter fence and gates. When entering the site it is surrounded by mature planting. There is nothing in the LDC application that would lead to a finding that this would change.”

If you visited that site today, Mr Hollobone, you would see that it is more like a moonscape—devoid of vegetation, with monumental earthworks having taken place and most of the trees and vegetation having been removed, despite the site being in a protected heathland habitat. These issues should have been controlled by the local authority through the site licence process, but there has been a reckless failure to take action. One of the park homes that is currently being advertised on that site is 50 feet by 20 feet, with two bedrooms and two bathrooms, and priced at £379,950, but it does not say anywhere that it is on an unlicensed site.

Silver Mists is within 400 metres of protected heathland. Under the severe restrictions in the habitats directive it would never have been given planning permission as an ordinary residential development, but there will now be 45 new permanent dwellings on the site, making a mockery of the protections that Natural England seeks to enforce on environmental grounds. Paragraph 3.4 of the supplementary planning document, “The Dorset Heathlands Planning Framework 2015-2020”, states that

“caravan and touring holiday accommodation”

is

“likely to have the same effect”

on the heathland as residential development. That is not the opinion of Natural England, but that organisation seems unable to enforce its own rules against caravan sites, even though it imposes the same rules with total inflexibility and rigour on any new proposed residential development, however small.

Although the issues relating to Silver Mists are matters for the new unitary Dorset Council, the largest number of unlicensed sites in my constituency are in the new Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole unitary authority area. The property section of the current edition of the *Christchurch Times*, a popular weekly newspaper, contains two full pages of advertising that promotes park homes provided by RoyaleLife. These include New Forest Glades in Matchams Lane and New Forest Glen, currently known as Tall Trees, in Matchams Lane. Despite their names, both sites are well outside the New Forest. What is more serious, however, is the description of the homes, which are offered for sale as “single storey” and coming from “the UK’s largest bungalow provider”. They are not bungalows. The “Collins English Dictionary” defines a bungalow as

“a one storey house, sometimes with an attic”.

It also quotes the origin as coming from the 17th century Hindi word “bangla”, meaning a house of the Bengal type. To describe a caravan as a bungalow must surely be a breach of advertising standards.

The promotional material omits any reference to the fact that the homes are caravans or park homes—and, therefore, chattels rather than interests in land. It highlights one of the consequences flowing from such status—the exemption from stamp duty—but fails to mention liability for 10% to be paid on resale. Furthermore, it does not refer to the fact that, as caravan sites, they have to be licensed under the 1960 Act, but are not.

New Forest Glades, formerly known as Port View Caravan Park, benefits in planning terms from a certificate of lawfulness permitting the siting of caravans for residential use on the land identified in that certificate. An application has been submitted to Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council for a caravan site licence, but the land identified in the application is not co-extensive with the land identified on the approved plan. When I first complained to the council I was told that the applicant had not even paid the required fee for the application. The council is advising the applicants that unless their current application is amended it will be refused. New Forest Glades is, therefore, being heavily marketed as a site for expensive new luxury bungalows, some of which are, I believe, already occupied. The caravans are not bungalows and do not even enjoy the benefit of a site licence, and gullible members of the public are being seduced by sharp marketing and misleading advertising into buying homes that are no more than chattels on unlicensed and therefore illegal sites.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): My hon. Friend highlights some of the poorer practice in the industry, but to shine some light on the situation I would like to highlight some of the better practices. I had an email from Mother Ivey's Bay Holiday Park yesterday, telling me that it champions the real living wage on its park homes, gifts 1% of its hire fleet to families in need through the Family Holiday Association, and never permits residential occupation of its holiday parks. Is there a lot we can learn from holiday parks such as Mother Ivey's Bay, which are industry exemplars?

Sir Christopher Chope: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We can learn a lot from them and the best way to encourage them is to take strong action against rogue traders. I shall come on to those points later.

Sir Greg Knight: Does my hon. Friend agree that those who seek to occupy a park home need the best possible advice, and some information about the law in the area, and will he join me in congratulating Age UK on preparing a wonderful factsheet—factsheet 71—explaining that law?

Sir Christopher Chope: Absolutely. That is important. In that context, the Government have given new responsibility to the Leasehold Advisory Service to advise potential purchasers of park homes. I, and indeed the all-party parliamentary group, had a meeting with Anthony Essien, its chief executive. The trouble is that although it can give advice someone must approach it for advice before it can do so, and many people do not because they are seduced by the sort of information that I have referred to.

[Mr CLIVE BETTS *in the Chair*]

Sir Peter Bottomley: I am sorry that a pre-existing commitment prevents me from staying for the rest of the debate.

It seems to me that the Advertising Standards Authority should get a complaint, and should quickly adjudicate, rule out of order and condemn the advertisements that my hon. Friend refers to. May I point out that Sonia McColl, the champion of park home owners, had her 40 foot, 10-tonnes mobile home stolen? My hon. Friend might join me in appealing to Devon and Cornwall police to find it and to find the people who stole it. Death threats are one thing; having your home stolen is another.

Sir Christopher Chope: That last point is really important because Sonia McColl did an enormous amount of good work on behalf of park home residents across the country. She was the victim of a vendetta and a serious crime and I have seen recent correspondence suggesting strong evidence against two potential perpetrators, but the prosecuting authorities are not taking the action they should be taking in that respect. As always, my hon. Friend makes a very good point.

May I refer to another site in my constituency that is now called New Forest Glen but is better known as Tall Trees, in Matchams Lane? No application has been received by Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council for a caravan licence, despite more than 100 of my constituents living and having their permanent homes in Tall Trees park. I have been told by the council that officers from both planning enforcement and environmental health have met the site owners to try to regularise the situation on several occasions, but without success. They are now advising the site owners that they are considering formal action to secure the necessary permissions for both planning and site licensing. Although such promises of action are welcome, they must be considered in the context of many years of inaction during which residents of Tall Trees have been denied the rights and protection that would be available if they lived on a licensed park home site. These rights include the ability to form a recognised residents association and restrictions on the amount by which ground rents can be increased, and on service charges being imposed.

Silver Mists, New Forest Glades and New Forest Glen are owned by one organisation, RoyaleLife. In March this year, I requested through the representative of Mr Bull, the chief executive of Royale Parks, that he address the problem, especially on Tall Trees. I referred to the fact that despite being recognised by Christchurch Council as enjoying residential status for 12 months of the year, many of the residents of Tall Trees were still paying site fees of £4,750 per year as well as council tax. If they had the benefit of formal residential status through a site licence, their fees would be £1,900 rather than £4,750. By not even applying for a site licence, Royale Parks is benefiting by being able to charge much higher fees. Residents also suffer because they must pay VAT on those fees. That situation should have been brought to a head by the council taking enforcement action against Royale Parks for not having a licence, thereby forcing the company to comply with the law. In my letter to Royale, I suggested that a meeting between Royale and the residents—who have been trying to have such a meeting for many months—would be useful, and I hope that such a meeting will now take place on 11 October.

Last Thursday I received the latest word from the council's corporate director for environment and community in response to the concerns that I have expressed on

[Sir Christopher Chope]

behalf of residents. It is not wholly reassuring. Although she says that she hopes the requirement for Royale Parks to regularise the situation and obtain the appropriate site licences or face formal action will provide some comfort to the residents, she could take action now to ensure that all those park homes for which residential use is recognised benefit from a residential site licence. I do not understand why the council has been so slow in acting against a site owner who is refusing to apply for a site licence. The site owner, unreasonably, is refusing to obtain a licence for the existing residential park homes, instead choosing to put pressure on residents to support his appeal in respect of other park homes on the Tall Trees development that do not currently have certificates of lawfulness or valid planning consent for residential use. Residents have been told that the site owner will address the issue only if the appeal against the refusal of certificates of lawfulness on other parts of the site are successful. In other words, residents are being held to ransom. Those appeals have been delayed inordinately, not least because the appellants want a full hearing.

I then got involved in writing to the chief executive of the Planning Inspectorate to see whether we could bring this matter forward. We now have an appeal fixed for 10 December, which is good news, but in the meantime, there can be no justification for denying Tall Trees residents, who are lawful occupiers of their caravans, the protection of a site licence.

People in Tall Trees who wish to sell their home are unable to get full price for it because of the constraints to which I referred. One constituent estimates that the value of his home has been depressed by £100,000 as a result of the site owner's actions and the council's refusal to take enforcement action.

So far, I have concentrated on cases where no site licence has been issued, but even where licences are issued they are often not enforced, leaving residents exposed to exploitation. One such site, in Ferndown in my constituency, is Lone Pine Park, which is owned by Premier Park Homes Ltd. Two of my constituents there have been harassed because their park home is old and regarded by the new owners as being out of keeping with the new image of Lone Pine Park, which is described in a brochure as offering

"bespoke homes...nestled within Millionaires' Row in Ferndown ...Dorset."

My efforts to engage with Dorset Council on the concerns expressed by my constituents have largely fallen on deaf ears. I wrote to its chief executive, Mr Prosser, on 5 August, but despite repeated requests for a reply I received a response only very late yesterday evening. In my letter, I referred to: the failure of the owner to deposit new site rules; residents and the emergency services having restricted access to estate roads because of the construction of new homes; rodent infestation; the dumping of rubbish and waste; and the proliferation of potholes, which prevent the local general practitioner car service from accessing the site. The chief executive says in his answer that he understands

"that a new site licence has been issued",

which provides the site operator with a number of permitted rights. He goes on to say:

"There are some outstanding matters which would require planning permission that are not covered by the terms of the site licence, and for this reason there is an open enforcement case on the site until such matters are regularised."

Despite having had my letter for two months, he goes on to say:

"planning/enforcement officers will visit the site again to check the situation to ensure the site is not being operated in a manner that would breach the permitted rights under the provision of the site licence or the permitted development order",

and that

"the enforcement file will remain open until the site has been regularised."

I refer to that letter at some length because it seems to show that the council has a very relaxed attitude to these important issues, which directly affect so many residents.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman makes a compelling case. One of the problems is that local authority officers have no experience in this area. It is vital that we give advice to residents nationally, because they are being penalised. Does he agree that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has to take this up as a matter of urgency?

Sir Christopher Chope: Absolutely; the hon. Gentleman is right. Indeed, the British Holiday & Home Parks Association suggested that what we need in England is one centre of expertise that can not only give advice but take action on these matters, just as happens for trading standards and large companies that operate on many different sites. There is every reason for saying that we should do something similar in the park homes sector.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate, which is timely from my perspective, as I visited Great Orton park homes last week. The main issues for the residents I met were the state of the park and the responsibility of the park owner.

I have two points to make. First, does my hon. Friend agree that introducing the fit and proper person test would go some way towards giving councils more powers to intervene where appropriate? Secondly, does he agree that it would be appropriate for residents to have the opportunity to acquire ownership of the park in certain circumstances, similar to the right that long leaseholders in blocks of flats have?

Sir Christopher Chope: My hon. Friend's second point is a suitable subject for a separate debate. One problem is that the land on which the caravans are situated is in separate ownership from the caravans, so to introduce a right to buy that land might legally be quite complicated. Having said that, it has been suggested that, to get round the site licence provisions, some operators are offering long leases on the small area of land on which each caravan or park home is situated, which leads to the situation where each separate park home on a site has to have a separate site licence. That is the latest way in which the law is being stretched. At my suggestion, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council and the leasehold advisory group are interested in looking into the issue to see whether we will have a situation rather like the one we had with some Traveller sites, where an acre of field was divided up into lots of very small plots.

I am sceptical about my hon. Friend's earlier point about the fit and proper person test. I will illustrate my scepticism by referring to the controlling director of Royale Parks Ltd. Robert Lee Jack Bull, born in May 1977, was appointed as the director of Royale Parks Ltd on 7 September 2018. Directly or indirectly, he holds between 25% and 50% of the shares and voting rights in that company, which is part of a complex group of companies. The information that I have seen from Companies House suggests that Mr Bull is the director of no fewer than 74 companies, which between them have assets of about £80 million and liabilities of about £110 million. Royale Parks Ltd controls 75% or more of the shares and voting rights in some of those subsidiary companies, such as Royale Parks (Dorset) Ltd. In marketing the properties, however, RoyaleLife describes itself as

"a family-owned business with a heritage dating back to 1945."

There may be such a heritage, but what is probably not well known is that Mr Robert Lee Jack Bull was convicted at Cheltenham magistrates court on two pieces of information brought by the trading standards department, as described in the register for 10 January 2013. They are in similar terms, so I will refer only to the first one, which says:

"Between 13/08/2009 and 08/11/2009 at Gloucestershire, being a trader, engaged in a commercial practice which, by omission, was misleading under regulation 6 of the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008 in that its factual contract omitted material information, namely by making representations to Phillip and Mary Bentall, being average consumers, with respect to a park home, 101 Cotswold Grange Country Park, Meadow Lane, Twynning, which representations caused them to take a transactional decision namely to sell their home at 32 Quay Lane, Hanley Castle and purchase 101 Cotswold Grange Country Park which they would not otherwise have undertaken if they had known that planning permission only existed for holiday homes at Cotswold Grange Country Park and that 101 Cotswold Grange Country Park was a holiday home, not a permanent residential property, contrary to Regulation 10 of said regulations and as a result caused or was likely to cause the average consumer to take a transactional decision he would not have taken otherwise.

Contrary to regulations 10 and 13 of the...Regulations 2008." Mr Bull was fined £4,000 on that and the other count, and ordered to pay costs and a victim surcharge.

If we go for a fit and proper person test, will Mr Bull fall foul of that test? I suspect that he would not, which shows the weakness of such a test. That is why I express openly my scepticism about it, but I think that if my constituents, certainly at Tall Trees, knew about Mr Bull's background they would be very concerned, because many of them were the victims of mis-selling. They bought their park homes at Tall Trees around the same period, between 2009 and 2013, having been told that those park homes carried with them full residential rights over a 12-month period.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): If the hon. Gentleman does not agree with the concept of a fit and proper person test, what does he propose to put in place to try to stop exactly the rogues that he has described in such detail to the Chamber?

Sir Christopher Chope: I am saying that I am not in favour of the fit and proper person test proposed by the Government. The alternative suggestion—I was going to refer to it, but I will now do so directly—is that the British Holiday & Home Parks Association, which is

basically a trade body, should be given responsibility for introducing some policing in this area. The right hon. Gentleman will know that, as a result of the Parking (Code of Practice) Act 2019, which was introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire, rogue parking operators are no longer able to get access to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency database unless they belong to the British Parking Association, an organisation that ensures high standards in the parking industry.

Similarly, we could have a situation where an organisation such as the BHHPA was able to enforce the fit and proper person requirements through its membership code, so that it would not admit into its membership organisations that fell below those standards. That might be a much more direct way of addressing this issue, rather than going down the route of the fit and proper person test. Which of those 74 companies to which I referred would be regarded as an unfit and improper company because of one director? This is a complex area, but the main point I would make is that the fit and proper person test is not the panacea that some people are suggesting it is.

In my capacity as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on park homes, I am well aware of the laid-back attitude of many local authorities in discharging their responsibilities to park home residents. I have received lots of information from members of the public, including information on operators: the Elmstead Residential Park in Andover, Lakeview Residential Park in Romford and others frequently referred to in *Private Eye*. There are serious continuing problems. We will hear about some of them during this debate. Successive Governments have engaged in window-dressing gestures rather than taking effective action against the rogue operators.

The fit and proper person test may be just such an additional issue. I hope that the Minister, in his response to the debate, will be able to set out the Government stall in respect of what the Government will do to force local authorities to meet their statutory obligations, and to protect the many thousands of park home residents looking for a strong lead in this area. It is recognised that there are a large number of reputable park home operators, but there are still rogues operating in this industry.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Three Members wish to make a speech, giving us about 10 minutes each, without putting a formal time limit on it. Thank you, Sir Christopher, for starting this debate, and I apologise for my late arrival.

10.11 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) for introducing the debate. There have been a number of park home debates, questions, interventions and Adjournment debates in Westminster Hall and the main Chamber, and I have been there to participate in every one of them. That is because we have three park home sites—not caravan parks, but park homes—in my constituency in the area in which I live, and it is concerning to hear the issues raised by the hon. Gentleman and his tale of woe with park homes in his area.

[*Jim Shannon*]

For the benefit of the Minister, I will explain the situation in my constituency so that he can respond. There were many problems in the past with park homes, but a new business has been assisting people over the last few months. I met the business on two occasions—the week before the last week, and a month earlier. Ards and North Down Borough Council and Newry Bourne and Down District Council in my constituency have a responsibility in this area in conjunction with the business, and they brought forward legislative change and recommendations. The Minister will not have that information before him right now, but it would be beneficial for his Department to contact directly NILGA or Ards and North Down Borough Council to find out what those legislative changes are.

It only works if the councils have the knowledge. Some people, including the shadow spokesperson, have referred to the knowledge of councils and their staff. Sometimes that is not in place. In my constituency area of Ards and North Down, a change has been made that will bring benefits. Park home owners and site managers are important too. I would like to highlight the helpful meeting I had recently with a site manager and new owners about the changes they are introducing to enable park home residents and owners to participate fully in the process, and to have a say in what happens. They have introduced a new system whereby people with park homes will meet every second week, with an advice centre that residents can visit and where they can express their views, ask for things and take things forward, rather than having confrontation all the time. We heard about that in the introduction to this debate.

Some things are in place, so again I ask the Minister to consider whether it is possible to check those things and chase them up; if he does, he might find a system that works. By the way, it only works if the park homes people are committed to it as well, but the council has a legislative responsibility.

Protection for park home residents is an issue that has been in play recently at local council level, as the council has submitted responses to the proposed model licence conditions for caravan sites, and there were a few issues that made it clear that both the park home owners and the residents needed help and protection. As we have three park home sites in the Ards peninsula, this is essential legislation for our area. It is important that the Department understands the needs of both residential and tourist parks.

In particular, I commend one of the local councillors, Councillor Nigel Evans, who has been at the forefront in putting forward the ideas, with the park home sites, and ensuring that legislation and the change that comes through with the consultation process can end up in the right place.

The council would welcome the inclusion of a condition that permits cars to be parked between units—that is just one of the small things that people in park homes have concerns about—if there is no obstruction of access or egress to, from or between the units, particularly in the case of an emergency, and where, in addition, parking between units has the consent of the site owner. We believe that there should be no permanent fencing erected, due to fire safety rationale.

In the past, decking and planting of trees—the hon. Member for Christchurch referred to trees in particular—have become issues, where the park homes want to enforce things. However, there has to be a way of finding that middle ground, so that we can move forward and strike a balance, whereby both park home owners and the residents can feel that they are part of the process.

I am aware that regulations in corresponding Welsh legislation allow for a non-combustible temporary awning to be in place, as set out by the Welsh fire service, which is underlined by a Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service recommendation. I believe that we should have a similar approach to the issue of awnings. It is the same with decking; any permissible decking must be non-combustible, for fire safety reasons.

Not only are we doing all this in my constituency, and in my council area of Ards and North Down, but it seems that the Welsh authorities are taking some steps in that direction as well. Again, it is good to look about the regions and see what others are doing, because we can all benefit collectively from good process and good practice.

It is very difficult to have sweeping legislation that can adequately address the needs of a Traveller site, a residential park and a tourist holiday park, as they are polar opposites. I believe there must be a segregation within the legislation and that we should have segments for each individual main category, to which the hon. Gentleman referred in his opening speech.

At the heart of my concerns is the fundamental difference in the use and therefore the nature of such parks. Holiday and touring caravan parks offer the infrastructure and environment for holiday makers; private owners may not use their caravan as their main residence. There is a difference, because residential parks provide pitches for park homes where the homes' owners make their permanent homes, with security of tenure. This is permanent housing. We have recognised that in Northern Ireland and in my particular area.

Although park homes, in rare exceptions, are sometimes found on mixed parks, where holiday and touring caravans are also located, the fact that park homes are housing while holiday caravans are used for tourism must not be overlooked. There is a balance to be struck, and the difference must be addressed. There must be a consistent application of model licence conditions for each type of caravan site, and it should be made clear that model licence conditions for holiday and touring caravan sites do not vary according to the length of time an occupier stays in a particular type of caravan.

The investment that individual owners make in their residential homes—in their park homes—can be £100,000-plus, which is a big investment. Obviously, prices have risen dramatically over the years, but that is the sort of investment that we are looking at in this moment in time. It is important that the people who have a caravan or a park home have security of tenure and know what they are buying into.

There must be consistent application of model licence conditions for each type of caravan site. It should be made clear that model licence conditions for holiday and touring caravan sites do not vary. That is very important, and I am not persuaded that the amalgamation of model licence conditions is helpful in achieving that aim. Therefore I do not believe that a consultation that

requires residents or Travellers to comment on holiday sites, or vice versa, is fair or appropriate. The difference is important for holiday caravan and residential park home owners, to ensure that the holiday or residential character of the park they use is maintained, as well as for park owners, and I believe that any blurring of these lines is a step in the wrong direction.

I conclude with the comment that there are many issues that need clarifying in the law, to enable residents to have full protection, and as much power over their property as is possible. I look forward to hearing from the Minister; I welcome him to his post and wish him well. I hope he can and will implement UK-wide legislation to enshrine protection for those choosing to live life in park home communities, the needs of which are separate and distinct from tourism and travelling models.

10.19 am

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I am aware that this is a sector you are interested in through your chairmanship of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. I welcome the new Ministers to their places and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) on securing the debate.

In the past four years, there has been quite a lot of work done to assess the impact and effectiveness of the Mobile Homes Act 2013, much of which has been instigated by the Government. However, much of this activity has been taking place beneath the radar, elbowed out of the spotlight by the Brexit debate. It is therefore good news that we are using this unexpected opportunity to review the situation and to consider whether we are on the right course to ensure the sector is fit for purpose, that the rights and welfare of residents are properly and fully protected, that local authorities have the powers and resources to enforce legislation, and that site owners who play by the rules can earn a realistic return on their investment and are incentivised to carry out further improvements to their sites.

Generally, I believe we are moving in the right direction—though we should be moving quicker and there are some significant obstacles to overcome. The 2013 Act has been a qualified success. In saying that, I do not wish to damn it with faint praise; indeed, many would say I have a vested interest in not doing so. The Park Homes Working Group 2015 has come up with some welcome recommendations and the Government's response to the 2017 review identified the issues that need to be addressed. The challenge will lie in securing their effective implementation.

In the remaining time, I shall briefly highlight the significant problems that need to be tackled and the potential pitfalls that need to be avoided. First, we have the rogue site owners. As we have heard, they still exist and are finding ways of circumnavigating the legislation that was intended to put an end to their intimidating and sharp practices.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I know the hon. Gentleman has done significant work on this through the all-party group and he is making an excellent speech. On that point, is it not true that people have been jailed for breaking the law while owning park

homes and, after their release, have been able to purchase new park homes because we do not have a fit and proper person test and a proper legislative framework to prevent that?

Peter Aldous: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is correct and we need to address those particular issues, but we need to make sure we do so in an effective way, with the desired consequences. The introduction of the fit and proper person test was provided for in the 2013 Act and is intended to eliminate these rogues. However, the feedback from Wales is that it has not done that and that a dispersed system with a tickbox approach, which has been pursued there, has not led to one application being refused. If introduced—I have no particular problem with that—the test must be properly co-ordinated and consistent across the whole country and it must plug the loopholes whereby a rogue site owner either puts forward a manager for licensing purposes yet continues to direct business themselves or pursues the type of dubious practices highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch.

Secondly, more needs to be done to ensure that local authorities have the necessary expertise and resources to enforce the legislation. From my own experience, I know that East Suffolk Council is very good and proactive in addressing a problem when it arises. However, there is more work to be done on day-to-day management and the guidance and advice given to both home and site owners. Such pre-emptive work will nip potential problems in the bud and ensure they do not develop into the major incidents that cause people so much distress and turmoil. I take the view that, if seen through, the recommendations of the working group and the Government's response to the review will address many of the concerns.

Thirdly, we have heard a great deal today about the sharp practices that are blighting many people's lives, but it is important not to lose sight of the fact that many site owners behave responsibly, fulfil their obligations and build good working relationships with the homeowners on their sites. It is vital that we do not create a system that forces them out of the sector to be replaced by the rogues who circumnavigate the arrangements and exploit the loopholes about which we have heard so much. In my experience, some good site owners are already deciding to leave the sector.

Fourthly, it is important to continue to distinguish between park homes and holiday homes and to guard against holiday parks morphing into park home sites, as my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch highlighted. The two sectors are completely different, with two different systems of protection against mis-selling and misuse. It is important that they remain as such and that we enforce the two systems fully and effectively.

Sir Christopher Chope: Does my hon. Friend accept that, in the light of recent planning decisions at appeal, the two sectors are now morphed together, and that the only way to resolve the matter and make them distinct again is through legislation?

Peter Aldous: My hon. Friend is correct to highlight the problem, and the situation has evolved and been allowed to develop at individual sites around the country. It may be like separating Siamese twins, but we must try,

[Peter Aldous]

because the two sectors are completely different, serving completely different markets. If at all possible, they need to remain as such.

My final point relates to the 10% commission on sales. That is an anomaly in many ways, yet it has to a large extent underpinned the sector's financial viability over time. The Government are right to be carrying out an assessment of the likely impact of a change to the rate of commission, and their findings should be fully scrutinised both back in this Chamber and, I am sure, by your Select Committee, Mr Betts. However, before making any changes we need to guard against and properly consider any unintended consequences, which could lead to a jacking up of pitch fees, for example.

Park homes have often been a forgotten part of the housing sector, but they play a vital role, particularly in certain seaside communities, such as those that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch and I represent, and for people at or approaching retirement. The sector has been overlooked in the past, and it is important that that does not happen in the future. We must continue to scrutinise the sector to ensure that homeowners have peace of mind, good site owners receive a fair return and the rogues are sent a clear message that they are not welcome and that we will send them packing.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): We will start the winding-up speeches no later than 10.40 am.

10.29 am

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) on securing the debate and on all the work he does via the all-party parliamentary group on park homes. I have been part of several of the APPG's meetings, and I am grateful that he continues to push the importance of reform—albeit there is a debate to be had about what form it might take.

I have been an MP for two and a half years, and this is an area of which I had no real knowledge or experience prior to becoming involved in local politics. I am very proud to represent, though, a number of park homes across the constituency of North East Derbyshire—in Old Tupton, Staveley, New Whittington, Tupton, and Marsh Lane. Those are the large park home sites, but there are a number of smaller sites across the constituency. I come from north east Derbyshire and north Derbyshire, and when we were driving past these sites, they looked superficially quiet, tranquil and well managed. I do not recall ever thinking that there would be the issues that I can now see, having taken an interest in the work that has been done by right hon. and hon. Members sitting in this Chamber and elsewhere, and having had the opportunity to talk to local residents about the challenges.

Fundamental for me is the fact that, at the moment, the processes, procedures and frameworks around park homes are largely personality driven. If there is a good owner of park homes who is willing to engage with local residents and have good interactions, the park is generally well run and, on the whole, people like and enjoy living there. When there is an owner who is not interested in working through the niceties, people can

get into great difficulty in a very short time and it can become highly problematic—particularly for local residents who perhaps have moved there to enjoy a quieter time in their lives—to manage that.

As happened in our local area, we can see the difference when park home ownership changes from owners who have not necessarily given a focus—rightly or wrongly, for good or bad reasons and whatever the underlying purpose—to somebody who wants to engage with local residents and manage the park in concurrence with them. There can be an incredibly quick turnaround in perception, management and actuality on those sites; we have seen one of those in the last year or so.

There is an immensely personal element to this. As somebody who is somewhat “small-state”, who traditionally ascribes to the principles of regulation where necessary but not everywhere, and good regulation rather than just chucking it out and seeing what happens, and who is reluctant to introduce new forms of regulation, I think this is an area where further attention is needed. As hon. Friends and hon. Members have done in the last few minutes, I acknowledge the work of the Government over the last 10 years. There have been successive consultations and legislation has been brought forward, which park home owners on the sites that I am privileged to represent say has incrementally improved things.

There is no panacea here; the situation will not be fixed at a stroke, but we must continue to find ways incrementally to improve it. When I arrived here in Westminster, I was pleased to see some of the Government consultations, and I am pleased also that the Government have followed through on them over the last few months and years. I held a park homes forum in my constituency for a number of residents a few weeks ago, where we discussed the fit and proper person test that the Government were consulting on over the summer. Like others, I welcome the principle of a fit and proper person test, or something equivalent, which moves us on from the challenges we have at the moment—particularly around the personal nature of the difficulties that park home sites can get into.

At that forum with local residents, we quickly saw some of the pitfalls, challenges and difficulties that can arise when trying to create a fit and proper person test. I acknowledge the difficulties of making such a test watertight and am interested in the suggestion from my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch around looking at alternatives.

The residents who came to talk to me can see holes in this proposal before it has even started: owners need either to take a fit and proper person test or to nominate somebody else to be a fit and proper person—which means that an entirely inappropriate person may be involved in park home site ownership. As long as they nominate somebody who nominally meets the local authority rules, they can continue to act, operate and manage with relative impunity. Furthermore, as my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch indicated, there are owners who refuse to engage with the regulations today, so they are therefore highly likely to refuse to engage with the regulations tomorrow, despite the threats that have been put into this consultation—if it is eventually turned into legislation.

We were also interested in the management order in the fit and proper person consultation. The logical extension could be that somebody was deemed not to

be a fit and proper person and was, nominally, not allowed to run their own park, but the local authority might come along and nominate itself or somebody else to run the park, and the individual might still take the profits, even when somebody else was running the park.

There is then the additional question of how we apply the rules, which has been referred to. Enforcement is already incredibly varied across the country, and that is likely to continue. Even with some of the points in the fit and proper person test, it will be highly reliant on the local authority having not only the desire to make things better—I think most authorities do, and North East Derbyshire and Chesterfield in my constituency certainly do—but the resources and the willingness to fight what look like they could be incredibly long legal processes to resolve some of these issues, which are very vivid on a day-to-day basis.

There could also be these rather strange scenarios where, if I read the consultation correctly, one local authority could deem somebody not to be a fit and proper person and would not really have to publicise that information to a great extent, while another local authority somewhere else in the country where that individual owned a park could deem them to be fit and proper, and may not even find out that another local authority had suggested that they might not be.

Again, it is easy to take shots at legislation, and I mean all of what I have said in the positive spirit of recognising that these proposals have the potential to improve things, but I think Ministers will be giving them greater consideration in the coming months, as they consider the consultation.

The other thing local residents said when they came to the forum was that they were keen to see many of the other reforms that have been mooted over the past couple of years. Those relate to CPI and RPI changes, pitch fees and looking again at the 10% sale charge, although I absolutely acknowledge the challenge posed by the industry's economic framework, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous).

I do not think we will ever achieve perfection in this area, given the structural problem of an extremely difficult tenure, management and legal framework that has the potential, through the interactions involved, to create tension and difficulties. I think most park home owners recognise that things will not be perfect, but they also understand—particularly when they deal every day with real and obvious difficulties in their local area and they just want to get on with their lives—that there are real challenges that need to be met.

I welcome the debate, and it is good that we have the opportunity to talk about these issues, which affect residents up and down the country. I welcome what the Government are doing to try to improve things, even if further consultation is required, as I have outlined. I hope we can make some progress in the coming months and years.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench speakers, who have 10 minutes each. There will then be time for Sir Christopher to wind up.

10.38 am

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, as it was to serve under that of Mr Hollobone. Could you

pass on our thanks to him? I enjoyed your team tagging at the start, just as I enjoyed the team tagging with the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) to get us under way. I pay tribute to him for securing the debate.

This is a significant issue. The hon. Member for Christchurch is the chair of the all-party group, which is industry backed. It is highly significant that we heard from him and others the detail of the way in which park home owners and residents are systematically ripped off by some site owners, as well as his call for legislation and tougher enforcement and sanctions.

I welcome the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) to his place in what may be his first debate as Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and I congratulate him. There were 10 Tory MPs present at the start of this debate—I had not realised quite how compelling the debate would be compared with the attraction of the Conservative party conference in Manchester. I just hope everyone got refunds on the rooms they booked and had to cancel.

We have heard again today why an estimated 85,000 park home owners require better protection, stronger rights and Government action. Many of the residents are older people on low incomes, and they are without the means of redress that we would expect to be available to residents in any well-functioning market. The speakers in the debate have listed some of the common problems: unlicensed sites; lack of rights and means of redress for park home residents; unfair pitch fees and unjustifiable increases, sometimes annually; mis-selling, with some site owners encouraging those buying a home on their site to use their lawyers in the transactions; indefensible rules that allow site owners a take or commission of up to 10% when people sell their home; rogue park owners resorting sometimes to bullying, thuggery and even criminality; and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) said, a lack of clear, independent advice from Government to park home residents and owners.

I say to the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) that, given the vivid and detailed descriptions we have heard of the deep problems in the market, a membership code for the trade body's members is not sufficient to resolve those problems—it simply will not cut it. A fit and proper person test may not be the single solution, but it must be part of the system to deal with what he described as rogue operators in the industry. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), from his constituency experience, powerfully made the case why a fit and proper person test must be part of the answer.

I enjoyed the contribution from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). As you well know, Mr Betts, he is probably the most regular contributor to debates in this House on housing generally and to debates on park homes in particular. He encouraged us to look to Northern Ireland and the experience in his area to see that we can work through co-operation, rather than confrontation. I hope that Ards and North Down Borough Council and his three park home site owners have responded to the current Government consultation. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), who spoke about how the Welsh have implemented tougher steps and how we in England can learn from them. I hope that the Minister will heed some of the practical points his hon. Friend made.

[John Healey]

The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), who has now left, and the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) both pointed out that the best site owners are dragged down by the worst. The hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), who has also left, said that for too long there has been too little action by the Government. I regret the fact that the hon. Gentleman is correct: no progress has been made in the past decade. As you will remember, Mr Betts, I was the Housing Minister in the Labour Government in March 2010, when we published the conclusions of a consultation we undertook on park home regulation, including proposals and plans for a new fit and proper person test as part of new licensing requirements for park home owners, and a range of new offences relating to licensing, with tough financial penalties when the rules were not observed. However, as with so much else to do with housing, the Government who came to office in May 2010 were concerned first and foremost with cutting regulation and investment, and from that point on they resisted any case for new regulation and new rules, which have since proved to be necessary.

We have had a lost decade for housing and for park home residents and owners because of the lack of action. The only legislation to be passed in the past 10 years was not Government legislation, but the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Waveney that became the Mobile Homes Act 2013. I pay tribute to him, but the fact is that, four years after that the passage of that Act—a qualified success, as he described it, but flawed—the Government had to undertake a consultation on what to do, and finally, in July, a full year after the consultation had concluded, they published their proposals. Will the Minister tell me today when the promised primary legislation will be introduced in Parliament? Will it be part of the Queen’s Speech in two weeks’ time?

With respect to the capacity of councils to do the vital enforcement job that all hon. Members have described, I say to the hon. Member for Christchurch that it is not necessarily that they are unwilling; given that the Local Government Association tells us that by next year councils will have lost 60p in every pound of their funding over the past 10 years, it is that at present they are unable. Will the Minister confirm how much will be available to councils to help to fund the new licensing role to accompany the legislation? Given that the problems that park owners face are part of the wider problems facing leaseholders who buy their home and find that they do not own it, will the Government back the plans that I have set out for Labour: ending leasehold on all new homes and giving existing leaseholders the legal right to buy their freehold for 1% of the property value?

This narrow issue, which nevertheless affects the day-to-day lives and prospects of tens of thousands of people, poses at a small scale the bigger choices that the Government face. The housing market is broken, and the Government must decide whose side they are on: whether they will remain, as they have been for the past 10 years, on the side of the commercial developers, the big landowners, the private landlords and the managers of park home sites, or whether they are—as Labour is—on the side of the hard-pressed homeowners, the first-time buyers, the leaseholders and the park home

residents. I say to the Minister that it is “make up your mind” time, before the voters make up their mind at the next election.

10.47 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Luke Hall): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) on securing this hugely important debate and on his work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group; I know that he has been and will continue to be a constant and powerful voice on these matters.

The park homes sector plays a crucial role in housing, particularly for older people; I say that not only as a Minister in my Department, but as a local MP who represents a number of park home operators and residents. Park homes provide a home for approximately 180,000 people across our country—mostly older people, many of whom are vulnerable, as has been referred to several times in this debate.

Some sites can be a dream move into the countryside, or by the sea in Christchurch, but we have heard too many examples today of that dream quickly becoming a nightmare. Hon. Members have raised numerous cases of exploitation, intimidation and coercion, and we know that some site owners exploit vulnerable residents financially through the use of complex ownership and management arrangements; I am aware of one case in which residents were asked to pay £40,000 per home for their written agreements to be renewed. Such practices are unjustifiable and unacceptable, particularly where the majority of residents are pensioners on low incomes whose park home is their only or main asset. All residents of park homes should be confident that they will be able to stay on their pitch as long as they choose to; they should not be worried about where to live or what unforeseen financial liabilities they may have in future.

We have seen vivid examples of the extreme misuse of variable service charges to extract ever more cash from those who may already be on low or fixed incomes, and I know of a case in which a resident lost their home and life savings as a result. There are examples of threats, intimidation and even violence to coerce residents into selling their homes way below the market price. Even at the less extreme end of the spectrum, there are examples of the market simply not functioning as it should. Some of them have arisen or been able to persist partly because the park homes sector is unique; over the decades, the sector has evolved much faster than the legislation we have passed to govern it, and there has been insufficient understanding of and information about the rights and responsibilities of park owners and residents. That has created a huge number of problems, which we are committed to resolving.

A unique aspect of the sector is the crucial relationship between the site owner and the resident. When it becomes unconstructive, as it has in the past, it leaves some residents exposed to unscrupulous site owners, which is why strong legal protections are necessary and why the Government continue to take the matter seriously. Legal protections are of course in place. The 1983 Act, which we have discussed this morning, gave residents security of tenure, which means the site owner can end the agreement only for certain reasons and with the approval

of the courts. Although the legal changes were important, they clearly failed to address a lot of the overarching challenges in the sector. That is why the 2013 Act, introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), strengthened the rights and protections of residents and gave local authorities more enforcement powers. There was a new process for selling mobile homes, which required the use of statutory forms to reduce the potential for sale blocking; the new pitch fee review process; and a new process for making sure that, when new site rules were introduced, residents were consulted.

We have also banned certain types of site rules that give site owners an unfair advantage. We have given local authorities more powers to issue compliance notices, which we have heard a lot about this morning, to carry out necessary work to the site, or face prosecution or an unlimited fine. To better tackle instances of harassment, the 2013 Act strengthened the criminal law by removing the requirement that acts of harassment have to be persistent before a prosecution could be brought by a local authority. Such measures have led to tangible improvements in the lives of many residents, although it has been highlighted again today that there is still a huge amount of work to do to improve the lives of park home residents and to really make the sector work.

The Government want to go further. In 2018, we conducted a review of the park homes legislation to understand how far the 2013 Act had gone towards addressing the overarching issues in the sector and to help expose what more can be done. We have been strong in our response. First, we said we would consult on the technical detail of introducing a fit and proper person test. There has been much discussion about that this morning. We are certainly committed to learning the lessons of what happened in Wales and making sure that the test is as thorough and fit as it can be. I certainly take on board the representations made about that by hon. Members in the Chamber this morning. The consultation closed on 17 September and we are now analysing the responses. We will seek to publish the Government response as soon as possible. We will certainly make sure that that is done by the end of the year. In answer to the question asked by the shadow spokesman, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), the statutory instrument will be laid before the House as early as possible next year, subject to parliamentary time.

John Healey: Is the Minister saying that the only legislation he has in mind is a statutory instrument and not primary legislation?

Luke Hall: Not at all. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will bear with me for a minute or so.

Secondly, we said we would establish a park homes working group, and we have done that. The group has been working since October last year to explore how rights and responsibilities can be communicated more widely and administrative processes improved. Thirdly, we said we would conduct research into the 10% commission charged on the sale of park homes, and I expect that to be under way by the end of this year. Finally, we will introduce primary legislation to address other challenges in the sector, including issues such as the definition of a pitch fee, the use of variable service charges and the use of complex company structures that can limit a resident's security of tenure.

John Healey: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way again. Will he confirm that, given the working group and the research still to be commissioned, the primary legislation will not be in the Queen's Speech in two weeks' time?

Luke Hall: At the moment, the assurance I can give the right hon. Gentleman is that a statutory instrument will be laid before Parliament early next year and there will be legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows. I am sure the Minister for Housing will be happy to provide further clarity as soon as it is possible to do so.

I will briefly go into a bit more detail about two points I mentioned that are particularly pertinent. As we have heard, the sector is complex, highlighting the importance of the working group, which brings together local authorities, the British Holiday & Home Parks Association and the National Caravan Council, residents' associations, LEASE and Age UK. A hugely important workstream for the group is on making sure that the communication of rights and responsibilities is as effective as possible.

We have talked about the age profile of a lot of people living in park homes. One of the important things for us to consider and remember and for the working group to ensure—certainly, it is in its recommendations to us—is the availability of information not only online, through the technological formats that we would use, but directly on sites and in paper copies. The working group has recommended that my Department should produce a single source of information and that all park home owners should be aware of it. The work is fully in train and will be made widely available, including paper copies.

I should like to give more detail about the introduction of the fit and proper person test. There was overwhelming support—not 100%, but overwhelming—for the introduction of such a test, in the review of legislation. We are committed to bringing it forward and putting it into effect, subject to the results of the technical consultation that closed on 17 September. We received 369 responses, 267 of which were from park home residents themselves—a good proportion. We also had representations from the legal sector, representative bodies, local authorities and the site licensing officers' forum. We are looking at the responses now and will publish them before the end of the year.

During the debate, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) asked whether the Department could make contact with Ards and North Down Borough Council. I am more than happy to make sure that that happens and would like to pass on my thanks to Councillor Edmund for the work that has been done in his area. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney talked about the availability of guidance and advice and about the importance of making sure the working group information is available as quickly as possible. I assure him that the Minister for Housing sees that as a priority.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who talked about the importance of the fit and proper person test, made a pertinent point about the joining up of local authorities and the conversations that they should be having. I shall make sure that that point is taken away.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch raised some extremely pertinent points and I shall ask the Minister for Housing to investigate them all fully in advance of their forthcoming discussion.

Sir Peter Bottomley: Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to the Park Home Owners Justice Campaign, and does he agree that one of the best ways to identify and deal with bad operators is publicity? Can I through him invite people to copy anything that they say to rogue operators to strokes@private-eye.co.uk, which is one of the great campaigners in this field?

Luke Hall: Absolutely. Such debates are an excellent way to shine light on poor practice in the sector. Park homes represent about 180,000 households and can house some of the most vulnerable people in society. Too often, those people are exploited and suffer poor treatment. They deserve our protection and support, so it is right that the Government have given and will continue to give significant attention to the sector. Good progress has been made in recent years. We have heard this morning that there is still a huge amount to do. I trust that I can count on the support of the Members present this morning, as we press ahead with our vital reform of the park home sector.

10.58 am

Sir Christopher Chope: May I give a warm vote of congratulation to my hon. Friend on his maiden speech as a Minister? Brilliant! He responded admirably to the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), and he understands our frustration and said that he will pass on those expressions of frustration to the Minister for Housing when she gets back from the conference.

I am most grateful to everyone who has participated in the debate, because it has shown that we regard the issue as a high priority. In the end, government and legislation are all about priorities. I hope that, because of the debate, the Department will start to draft some legislation. As we know, when the current Transport Secretary was the Housing Minister, he was told that there was no space for legislation in the Queen's Speech, but he had prepared the legislation and the drafting. One of the most depressing things that the all-party parliamentary group heard when we last met officials was that no work was being done on that. May I suggest that the Minister get draftsmen to work quickly on addressing the issues we have been debating today?

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered legal protection for residents of park homes.

Improving Healthcare: Isle of Wight

11 am

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered improving healthcare on the Isle of Wight.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. It is good to see the Minister here; I thank her very much for attending. This is an important debate for the Island; I will demonstrate that to the Minister with an example from just yesterday, when, by coincidence, a friend of a friend went into St Mary's A&E, on a doctor's recommendation. They were seen and assessed quickly, within 15 minutes, which is great; but they then sat there for nearly 10 hours, with a cannula sticking out of their arm, and with "urgent" written on their paperwork. One o'clock, 2 o'clock, 3 o'clock and 4 o'clock came and went, and they left at 10 pm.

This is not a criticism of NHS staff—quite the opposite. I have friends and acquaintances who work at St Mary's and in the NHS on the Isle of Wight; I know their dedication and professionalism, and I am very grateful to them for it. Nor is this criticism of the leadership at the trust under our new executive, Maggie Oldham; I am a big fan of her leadership and her team, who are doing good work. We need that leadership on the Island; frankly, we have lacked it in recent years. What I wish to discuss with the Minister is the NHS funding system and how that relates to the Isle of Wight as an island.

The broader context for this debate is my proposal for an island deal that recognises the additional costs—which are not massive; sometimes they are small—of providing on the Island good public services equivalent to those on the mainland. I have had several conversations with the Prime Minister about my proposal for an island deal, and I am delighted that he has agreed to it in principle; he most recently talked of it in the House on 25 September, when he spoke of

"the island deal that we are going to do—I can assure him that we are, do not worry."—[*Official Report*, 25 September 2019; Vol. 664, c. 803.]

I am delighted with that.

This is not us asking for something that we think we deserve because we feel that our need is greater; this is an assessed case, based specifically on the fact that the Isle of Wight is an island and so suffers from issues to do with economies of scale and distortions in the market. The additional cost of providing public services on islands, with their limited markets and fewer possible economies of scale, has long been recognised. If the Minister wishes, I can send her an extensive list of academic research on the subject, the most recent piece of which was done for the Isle of Wight by the University of Portsmouth.

The Scottish islands have the special islands needs allowance, which gives additional funding of about £6 million per Scottish island to recognise the additional costs and challenges of providing public services to isolated island communities. We have no equivalent in England, and because of that, we have been structurally underfunded for generations, no matter whether Labour or the Conservatives have been in government; that is how the formula was designed. I wish to look briefly at three key aspects of this.

There are probably five or six elements to the settlement under the island deal that I am discussing with the Prime Minister, but today, I am looking specifically at healthcare costs. In July, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care said that the Isle of Wight is

“unique in its health geography, and that there are places in this country—almost certainly including the Isle of Wight—where healthcare costs are higher”—[*Official Report*, 1 July 2019; Vol. 662, c. 943.]—

by dint of isolation and, in its case, of being an island.

The 2019 sustainability plan of the Island’s NHS trust estimates the following costs, which I will discuss in slightly greater detail and then put some questions to the Minister. I know that she will want a decent amount of time to reply, so I will not speak for more than another 10 or 15 minutes, so I can listen as well. The trust estimates that the additional cost of providing acute services on 24 hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week wards is £8.9 million. It assesses the additional cost of providing ambulance services, including a coastguard helicopter ambulance, as £1.5 million and the cost of patient travel by ferry as £500,000, although I suspect it is slightly more, as I will come on to.

Those figures come from the need to provide a baseline service by law for a smaller population than average for the size of a district general hospital. As the Island’s NHS trust states,

“the Island’s population is around half of that normally needed to sustain a traditional district general hospital.”

Because of that smaller population, we do not have the throughput of people, which means that we generate fewer tariffs. To explain it to a layman, we have fewer people going through our hospital, so we claim less money for those procedures, but we still need to keep the wards open and up to the decent baseline standard that people expect.

It stuns me that I still have to explain this. I was having a conversation about the Island this summer with a friend of mine, a Secretary of State and someone I hold in high regard, who turned to me and said, “You have to get to it by ferry, don’t you?” The Isle of Wight is not an island like the Isle of Sheppey or Anglesey in the sense of being connected to the mainland and an island only in a quaint medieval cultural way. We are an island in a practical way: we are separated from the mainland.

We lack a fixed link, which would cost between £2 billion and £3 billion. If the Government ever wish to discuss that, I would be delighted, but until such time, we are separated by water, so primarily, almost exclusively, people travel to the Island by ferry, which changes the dynamics of the hospital and our economy in many different ways. For example, we need to run an accident and emergency service 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It is the same with the maternity ward, because people cannot give birth on a ferry or in a helicopter, and the helicopters do not run in all weathers nor the ferries overnight.

We have a baseline legal requirement to have a hospital on the Isle of Wight, but we have half the usual population for a district general hospital, so everything costs more, because we do not have the tariff-per-head throughput. Our A&E runs seven days a week, but our income is based on a national tariff for a much larger population. We must have a four-cot special care baby unit as part

of the maternity unit cover, but a lot of the time, I am delighted to say, it has no babies in it, because the births are healthy. That is wonderful, but we still need to run it, which costs quite a lot of money, even when it is empty, because we have half the population. The same applies to other wards, such as the dementia ward, and to intensive care.

For all those units and wards, we have to provide a baseline service with significantly less income from NHS England because we do not have the tariff, so it costs more to provide the same standard of service. Historically, therefore, we have been underfunded, which has had an impact on the quality of the service that we offer. For example, we are meant to have eight consultants in A&E, but we have four, which is why people wait for 10 hours rather than two—as happened yesterday.

It also costs more to attract permanent staff due to isolation, because of the island factor, so we tend to spend more on agencies and specialist services. Our use of agency and locum staff is frankly bad. We need to find solutions to it, and we are having to do so. To get a locum to come to the Island, we may have to offer to pay the ferry fare, because our ferries are probably the most expensive per mile on the planet. The use of locums and temporary staff also has a knock-on effect on training for our young doctors and nurses. The General Medical Council found issues with foundation training due to inconsistent supervision, up to and including earlier this year.

That is the first point, on acute services; I will speed up, because I want to get as much in as possible. Secondly, our ambulance service has suffered, too. Why? Because we cannot use an overlay of ambulance. When someone is taken ill and needs an ambulance and they are on the Hampshire-Sussex border, if there is not a Hampshire ambulance willing to take them, we can pretty much guarantee that there will be a Sussex ambulance coming along.

We cannot have that. We do not have that on the Island, because it would take an hour and a bit for a Hampshire ambulance to get on the ferry to come over. We cannot call on out-of-area ambulance services from Sussex, Hampshire, Dorset or Cornwall to support us. At busy times, when we are taking folks to the mainland, the additional overtime and manning costs stack up very quickly as soon as there is a slight pressure on our ambulance service. We estimate that cost to be £1.5 million, and I am very happy to discuss that, along with the £8.9 million and the £500,000 for patient travel. This is not based on people being poor and earning a bit less than the national average; they are specific costs associated with islands.

Finally, there is patient travel. In 2017-18, there were 31,314 episodes of planned care—sorry for the bureaucratic terminology—on the mainland relating to Isle of Wight patients, which translates to 44,608 related journeys from the Isle of Wight to the mainland. Through our plan to improve quality of care on Isle of Wight, with the use of telemedicine and better-integrated IT, we hope to reduce the amount of travel to the mainland, but I believe that NHS England should be funding some of that patient travel.

At the moment, the council funds £60,000-worth of chemotherapy visits; the ferries, to their credit, subsidise others, but I want the ferries to spend that subsidy money on other things and I want NHS England to pay for this. I look at the Scilly Isles as an example: the

[*Mr Bob Seely*]

National Health Service (Travel Expenses and Remission of Charges) Regulations 2003 set out that any Scilly Isles resident not entitled to free NHS travel will pay a maximum of £5 for their travel costs. I ask for that £5 maximum return fare to be funded as part of this Isle of Wight settlement and for NHS England to take on the cost of patient travel to the mainland, such as for chemotherapy and other specialist services, which is estimated at £500,000 per annum, or maybe a little bit more, depending on how it is calculated. I would like NHS England to fund that cost. That would also act as a spur to improve IT integration and telemedicine, because the Island wants to become a model.

I am delighted that we got the £48 million from the Department of Health and Social Care recently—thank you very much indeed. It was a fantastic bid put in by Maggie and her team, which I was delighted to support and meet Ministers about. Some of that money is for improving A&E, but some of it is for telemedicine.

I have met some of the guys and girls doing the telemedicine work: we have 42 nursing homes on the Island, and in, I think, 18 we now have a little blue box so that residents in the nursing home can have their vital statistics checked on an almost daily basis, which saves money and time and means that their information is sent every morning to the GP or district nurse so that they can be checked up on. It is much more proactive. This is the future; it is really good and very exciting, and we want to be in the forefront of that. It would make not only ethical and medical, but economic sense for us to do that, because there would be fewer trips to the mainland, lower costs, fewer trips to St Mary's and even fewer trips to GP surgeries.

Those are the three areas I am focusing on: the cost of acute services, £8.9 million; the cost of ambulance, £1.5 million, including coastguard and air ambulance; and the cost of patient travel. I stress that this is not related to wider problems. We have problems with deprivation on the Island, which sometimes surprise people. Areas of Newport and Ryde are among the 10% most deprived in England. Our disease prevalence is significantly higher than the national average for dementia, stroke, learning disabilities, arthritis and some cancers. I am not yet making a case for additional funding for those things, because the priority is for the Government to recognise the additional costs of providing healthcare on the Isle of Wight.

We are doing our own thing. I stress to the Minister that we are not covering up for a poor-quality NHS trust. It is in special measures, but we have new leadership, we are turning it around and we are going in the right direction. Again, I pay tribute to the leadership of the NHS team on the Island. We know that we need to do more to improve our productivity. We had 149 nurse vacancies earlier this year. By the new year, we expect that figure to be under 90—by getting Filipino nurses in, for sure, but also by training up Islanders and giving them jobs as nurses. We have new models of care, particularly in mental health and acute services, which in the past have been too—I think the word is paternalistic. We are significantly improving those fields, especially mental health, which is still seen to be inadequate and failing.

We are also sharing consultants more. This is the way ahead. We cannot afford specialists on the Island, given our size, but by working with Southampton or, more likely, Portsmouth, we can afford to share those specialists. We are about to sign a memorandum of understanding with Portsmouth, so that we make greater use of efficiencies, sharing consultants, specialisms and specialists, so that when they are not working in Portsmouth, they can jump on the ferry and come over to St Mary's, or wherever they are needed on the Island, and support us.

As we know, there have been recent failings, which is why we are in special measures on the Island. Some recent episodes that concern me include patients leaving hospital without a discharge summary. That has been happening too often—it was raised in a coroner's court recently—and it is not good practice.

I cannot make things in the past right, but I can do my utmost to make sure they do not happen in future. I am trying, in my role as Member of Parliament for the Island, to be a critical friend to Maggie and her team. When I hear complaints from my fellow Islanders about certain things, I will pass them on to her, in the hope that she can focus on them, while I understand the importance of supporting the new leadership team. What I ask in return from that team is honesty, to ensure that we are transparent about any past or current failings—not to lay blame or have a go at people, but to work collectively towards raising our standards and giving Islanders the quality of healthcare that, frankly, we deserve and that I want to see for the Island. Until that time, what we have will not be good enough, because the Government have never taken into account the additional costs of being an island.

Overall, things are getting better. I am delighted about the £48 million, and I have discussed telemedicine and IT, so I will not go over them again. To sum up, we face special circumstances—severance by sea—hence the need for an island deal, which I have discussed with the Prime Minister. In this debate, I am looking at healthcare and additional costs in three specific areas: acute, at £8.9 million; ambulance, including coastguard helicopter, at £1.5 million; and patient travel, at half a million. Those are what we accurately and honestly assess to be the additional costs.

I am hugely grateful to the Minister for being here. I hope that she is not missing conference on my account—or perhaps she is very happy to be; I am not quite sure nowadays. My questions to her, finally, are these. Will NHS England accept our costings for the additional costs of providing services on the Isle of Wight that are due to the requirement for baseline services, yet with fewer people coming through and therefore less funding? Or will NHS England provide its own costings, and if so, on what basis? I would like to know whether NHS England disputes our figures and when we can expect official comment. I am not trying to bounce the Minister into a decision today, as well she knows. The most important thing is that we get a considered response and that the conversation now begins, so that I can deliver what I need to deliver for my people.

Can the Minister please outline for the public record, or write to me if need be, a route by which the Island and NHS England can work together to identify the additional costs of providing healthcare on the Island and look at the timeframe for decision making? Finally, where does she feel the additional healthcare pressures

figure in the overall funding for the Island? I ask that because we have additional costs that are associated not only with being an island, but with being slightly more deprived in some areas. We have higher dementia, cancer and arthritis rates on the Island, so we are not only dealing with some acute and chronic diseases that have rates higher than the national average, but we are dealing with the island factor as well. I thank the Minister for her time.

11.20 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts.

First, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) for bringing forward this important issue and securing this debate. I recognise his support for the trust and his desire, and the desire of others, to improve services. Today, however, he has highlighted three specific issues.

We recognise that the Isle of Wight faces different challenges from those on the mainland. As my hon. Friend said, the Island represents a very distinct healthcare environment. It is heavily dependent on acute services close by, but there is the difficulty of travelling across water and the challenges that that lack of accessibility brings to the Island.

I know that the local Sustainability and Transformation Partnership is considering how to put healthcare on the Isle of Wight and in Hampshire on a sustainable footing, with the high-quality care that my hon. Friend has asked for, in the interests of the system as a whole and for the long term.

The impact that those challenges have on local NHS systems needs to be discussed. I reassure my hon. Friend that we are committed to providing the high-quality care that he seeks to meet the needs of people across the Island and to accommodate people irrespective of where they live.

It is important that we do not let the NHS stand still, and my hon. Friend alluded to telemedicine and to making use of all such technologies in the future. We know that people are living longer, and the Island has an elderly population that is higher than the national average. That elderly population is living with multiple co-morbidities, which puts a higher pressure on the service, as he said. However, he also spoke about how the Island is beginning to address those challenges, using blue boxes and using the whole system to help the entire system to work better.

The long-term plan sets out how we will provide high-quality healthcare for all and ensure that people live longer, healthier and more independent lives, which is what we all want. The plan recognises that the NHS needs to change and implement new systems to meet 21st-century challenges, so we are actually at a point of opportunity.

We are committed to delivering high-quality universal care, irrespective of location. That is particularly important given the challenges that Island life brings and that my hon. Friend outlined. He knows that there are benefits of being on an island, but that there are also some constraints, which we must now sit down and work through.

We accept that there are additional costs for providing healthcare on the Island. It has individual challenges, arising from delivering care on the Island with the diseconomies of scale that my hon. Friend spoke about so well. Earlier this year, we committed £2.7 million in extra funding for the Isle of Wight under the fair funding review, to help to start working through some of these issues. This money is to support the plan of the clinical commissioning group, the NHS trust and the local council for integration of public services, which will improve the care that patients receive. I hear what he says about how we must work together to find solutions for the long term.

As my hon. Friend said, the Isle of Wight will also benefit from the announcement of the 20 hospital upgrades, and I am grateful that he mentioned the £48 million for the Island. This extra investment will lead to improvements in patient care, and hopefully will allow flexibility for Maggie Oldham, the trust's chair, and the rest of the team to progress their ideas further, allowing the Island better to utilise innovative technology, improve efficiency and improve the quality of care, which he has highlighted is his key objective.

I pay tribute to all those who have been involved with the trust, given the difficult circumstances it faced when it received a rating from the Care Quality Commission of "inadequate". It has begun the positive journey to make things better. I recognise the hard work that everybody has put in across the health and social care system in the area, which is a really positive start.

We will now look at the local system, supported by NHS England and NHS Improvement, to protect and build on those achievements. I have already spoken to the Minister for hospitals, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), who is more than happy to arrange a meeting at which he and his officials would be present, so that some of the specific questions may be given the proper and appropriate attention, because my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight would not expect specific answers today.

Moving forward, it is vital in the medium term that the Island develops a strong joined-up plan across its health and care system to deliver the vision of a person-centred, co-ordinated health and social care system that gives patients the support they need. That is a unique system that cares for people from birth to end of life. My hon. Friend highlighted the challenges around the ambulance service, for example, such as not being able to use the overlay ambulance services available more easily to those on the mainland. I have also heard his request about patient travel costs. I have been assured by my hon. Friend the Minister for hospitals that NHS England and NHS Improvement have been involved in the development of plans and will continue to work closely with colleagues on the Isle of Wight. I therefore hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight realises that we are all here to support both him and the development of the broader health system on the Island.

While I recognise the concerns of Members who represent island constituencies, I hope that they will be reassured by our ongoing work to ensure that appropriate NHS resources are available, both on the Isle of Wight and on similar islands, to support patients and to meet CCG obligations to commission the best possible care. The Government are committed to ensuring that all patients receive high-quality healthcare that meets their

[Jo Churchill]

needs, irrespective of where they live. Whether it involves me or my hon. Friend the Minister for hospitals, I look forward this constructive dialogue continuing.

Question put and agreed to.

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.

Social Care Funding

[SIR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. There are plenty of speakers, so we will have a time limit of four minutes, perhaps dropping to three as the debate develops.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered social care funding.

I should like to introduce a discussion on the funding of social care and narrow that to adult social care and the specific areas covered in the admirable Library briefing around the Green Paper in its absence.

It is a relief to debate something that is not about Brexit, although there is probably some indirect connection. Attempts have been made to blame the delays on Brexit, but the Secretary of State was candid enough to acknowledge that deep-seated disagreements going back 20 years explain why we are at an impasse on the basic principles.

There are a couple of contradictions or paradoxes that we must try to unravel. We all say that the only way forward is to have an all-party consensus, but at the same time the issue is increasingly weaponised. We all say that this is an incredibly urgent problem, but it stays for longer and longer in the long grass. Until we get to the root of those problems, we are not going to make any headway.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will the right hon. Member give way?

Sir Vince Cable: Will the hon. Gentleman wait a moment? I will happily take interventions in a few minutes.

At the root of this—and trying to be generous to all parties—is a lot of public misunderstanding. This is a complex subject. To take just one point, half of the adult social care budget is not about old people; it is for younger adults. The public fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the means test—most people do not realise it exists until they encounter it. Consequently, people are frightened when they see proposals that are characterised on one side as a death tax and on the other as a dementia tax, apparently unaware that we have a death tax and a dementia tax now.

I cannot in my short contribution solve such a fundamentally difficult problem that has been going on so long, but we need to try to disentangle issues that are fundamentally different. My primary concern is social care—how we support people in the community so they can function with a proper life, preferably at home, outside of hospital.

A totally different set of problems—wealth, property and inheritance—leads to a lot of the emotional angst caused by what is sometimes called catastrophe risk: people landed with financial obligations as a result of having long-term personal care and the expense of £50,000 a year or whatever in a residential home. However, that is about wealth, distribution and assets. It has nothing to do with health and we have to try to separate the two.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. I am also grateful for the opportunity to discuss this matter on a cross-party basis. He mentioned a cross-party consensus earlier. Is he aware of last year's joint report by the Health and Social Care Committee and the Communities and Local Government Committee on the future funding of social care? That report came to a cross-party consensus on how we can move forward, and one of the solutions was a social care premium.

Sir Vince Cable: Yes, there is a lot of joint thinking. We have the joint House of Commons Committees, and my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), as Chair, was critically involved in that. There is also a very good piece of work by the House of Lords, and the considerable brains of Lord Lawson and Lord Darling contributed to a cross-party consensus. A lot of think-tanking is going on in the vacuum created by the Government's non-publication. There is no shortage of ideas, but we need to be clear what the problem is—and it is a very serious one.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Vince Cable: If the hon. Gentleman lets me go through this, I will take an intervention.

The first point is the rapid growth of demand as a result of an ageing population. We all know that. As far as we can establish, because of ageing and the onset of dementia in particular, we have a growth in demand of about 3.5% a year. That is considerably in excess of the growth of the economy and the resources to fund it. That is the fundamental problem at the heart of all this. We have 800,000 people with dementia at the moment, which goes up to 1 million in 2025, rising to 2 million in 2030. At the moment, there is no clear picture of how this demand is to be met.

My second point, related to that, is that we have a large and growing hidden cost that is not quantified—unpaid caring. If we take dementia alone—just one dimension of adult social care—we have 350,000 carers at the moment, of whom 110,000 have had to give up their job, which is a cost to them, the Exchequer and their employers.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Vince Cable: I will take an intervention, but I will return to the theme in a moment.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this timely debate. He refers to costs. The costs to families and individuals hit with dementia are 15% higher than they are for any other illness. They are about £3.5 billion because people have had to give up their jobs for all sorts of reasons. I hope that further assists him and I hope he agrees that we have to think about it.

Sir Vince Cable: Yes, that is quite right. We tend to use dementia, particularly the work of the Alzheimer's Society and others, to illustrate the problems here but they are not unique. Many people with arthritis, diabetes and serious stroke conditions face the same set of problems.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. He rightly points out the importance of unpaid carers. Any new consensus, which must come, should make clear provision to support those who do the caring—12,000 unpaid carers in my constituency alone. If they were to cease caring—if we do not care for the carers—the social care burden on the taxpayer more generally becomes even more unmanageable.

Sir Vince Cable: Indeed. My hon. Friend is right, and he reinforces the central point I am making.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): A constituent of mine raised the case of her father who had been assessed by the health service as needing 24-hour, one-to-one support. That was withdrawn when he went into a care home, because the burden fell back on social care. There was then the problem of who was going to pay. He immediately had a series of falls and became more frail and more vulnerable, causing him and his family enormous stress. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned Labour's proposal that we will support particularly those with dementia and their families in paying for social care costs. In the spirit of cross-party consensus, does he agree with that?

Sir Vince Cable: I will come to that point later and to the heart of what I understand to be the Labour proposal—on free personal care—in not too polemical a way. It presents opportunities but also serious problems.

We have the growth in demand, the hidden costs, and the burden on local authorities. It is easy to score political points, and I will put my hand up immediately: after the financial crisis I was part of the Government and we cut—in real terms—per capita spending in this area by about 11%. It did not start then. The number of people with so-called moderate needs who were excluded in the previous five years rose from 50% to 75%. It is an old problem as well as a new one, and we are all faced with the challenge of how to finance local authorities. If local authorities are underfunded, we all know the problem gets passed back to hospitals in delayed discharge.

There is the problem of the labour force. It is horrendous. Until I saw the figures, I had not realised just how bad it is. There is an annual turnover of 450,000 care workers for a mixture of reasons, a lot of it to do with pay and conditions. We currently have 100,000 vacancies, and there is the potential for stricter immigration controls, which would create even more vacancies and make them even more difficult to manage. The business model for the companies involved, partly in residential care but also in domiciliary care, is just not viable; as I understand it, four of the leading providers are now up for sale and one is in administration.

The problem, as we all recognise from our constituencies, is that there is a two-tier system: on the one hand, luxurious and comfortable homes for those who do not need to worry about money, but on the other crumbling homes with minimal standards, overseas workers on minimum pay, and a nasty smell of urine—we have all seen them. An intermediate level of care that is attractive and affordable is simply not available.

Those are the problems, as I think we all recognise, but the question is: what can be done? As has been mentioned, a wide variety of brains in and outside this

[*Sir Vince Cable*]

place have been contributing and thinking about it; one of the unintended benefits of the Government's delay has been that others have filled the vacuum with ideas. The most useful ideas that I encountered seemed to be from organisations such as the Health Foundation and the King's Fund, which have no political axe to grind that I am aware of. They suggest that rather than trying to deal with all these complicated problems together, we should deal with them in sequence, starting with those that are more manageable. Essentially, they suggest that there are four stages to dealing with them, which I will briefly canter through.

First, we should identify what we need to do simply to stabilise the present position, unsatisfactory though it is, because there is a real danger of going even further backwards as a result of lack of resource. The King's Fund identifies a need for an extra £1.5 billion by 2021 and £6 billion by 2030 simply to keep the system at its present level, unsatisfactory though it is. I hope we can all agree that that is the absolute minimum that we should aim for.

The second level up is improvement. As the King's Fund identifies it, that means going back to the standards that prevailed in 2009-10, although they were unsatisfactory even then, and filling in some of the holes in availability of social care. It costs that at approximately £8 billion a year, rising to £10 billion after five years—a significant sum. My party, including colleagues present, has come with up with one suggestion: creating a ring-fenced fund based on a penny in every pound of income tax. That would raise £6.5 billion, which would get us most of the way there. I do not want to be doctrinaire about the best way of doing this, but I hope that there can be some understanding that that contribution, which is very limited in terms of public funding, could get us back to a more acceptable standard. People have different views about which taxes we should use and how we should ring-fence the money, but that seems to me to be the minimum level of ambition—and it could happen without legislation if the parties agreed that we should proceed in that way.

We then get on to the more difficult level, which relates to charging. One thing that has come through to me from reading the various think-tank reports is the growing interest in the idea of free personal care in the Scottish model. I confess that I have always been sceptical about it—I have the traditional economist's scepticism of free things—but its proponents note two practical attractions that have nothing to do with ideology or party thinking: it aligns social care and healthcare, if we are going to integrate the two systems, and it brings in a lot of people who are currently excluded from social care provision, so that they are more likely to stay at home rather than going into hospital. It has potential benefits as well as costs.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I am an ex-nurse. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is right to offset the costs of social care against what we would save the NHS? I regularly had eight patients, and probably three of them would be medically fit for discharge and did not want to sit in a bed, although they had to do so. When we consider the cost, we must also balance that issue.

Sir Vince Cable: That is the case, and I hope that when the Green Paper appears there will be a proper, objective look at free personal care. In the past this has been an ideological issue, but there is no reason why it should be. It is a practical proposition. As I understand it, the Scottish model has pluses and minuses—it is certainly very popular with the people who benefit from it, but there are much stricter tests for eligibility in terms of physical functioning—but at least let us consider it objectively. It is costly, however—about £8 billion a year over and above the other items I have mentioned.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): This was a flagship policy of the coalition Government in which I served in the Scottish Parliament, and I am proud of that. One problem that we never got around—I think this also applies to rural English constituencies and Welsh constituencies—is the issue of sparsity and distance. How do we deliver this service when there are vast distances between the various old people involved? When there is a low population base, how do we find the number of carers that we desperately need to tend to those elderly people, who deserve dignity at that stage of their life? It grieves me to say this, but in north-west Sutherland in my constituency we have a distinct problem with finding those carers. People have come to see me in the last few weeks who have not had a carer for three, four or five days, which is terrible.

Sir Vince Cable: My hon. Friend is right to point out the practicalities of this issue. That links to one of the current difficulties with domiciliary care, which is that providers are often not compensated for travel. I imagine that in a remote constituency that would be accentuated many times.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (LD): Does my right hon. Friend accept that this could be done in a step-wise fashion? We could probably start immediately by introducing free personal social care for people at the end of their life, and we could then move forward to try to bring more people within that sphere. There is certainly a strong economic and moral case for introducing such care at the end of life.

Sir Vince Cable: That is a helpful and humane suggestion, and if we approach this whole question in terms of its practicality, rather than with abstract ideology, we might make some headway. What my hon. Friend suggests seems an eminently sensible way to start that process.

The last and most difficult issue is the one in which successive Governments have got hopelessly bogged down: the so-called catastrophe risk for the small number of people who are caught with prolonged expenses as a result of residential care. When I was in government the Dilnot report attempted to address that issue, but I think we have moved beyond that now. This is a classic problem of insurance, and it is now recognised in a way that it was not before—I think the current Prime Minister said this publicly—that the private insurance market cannot, and will not, deal with this problem. If there is to be insurance it must be social insurance, and large numbers of people will have to make a contribution to prevent the burden falling on a small number of unfortunates who contract long-term conditions, with all the costs involved.

That could be done in a variety of ways. One idea is a supplement to national insurance. Another idea from 10 years ago, which I had no problem with, is that if we are to solve the problem of people losing their inheritance, everyone who pays inheritance tax should pay a small supplement. That struck me as a good social insurance principle. Whether or not that formula was right, we have now got to a point of accepting that this is a social insurance problem, and there are different mechanisms for dealing with it. If we are reasonably grown up politically, we should find a way of closing that gap.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman is making a fantastic speech on what we will all agree—Brexit aside—is the issue of the day. I visited Parkinson's UK in East Kilbride, and Parkinson's sufferers are particularly affected by social care catastrophe burdens because theirs is a degenerative condition that can start in their 50s, or even earlier, and go on for the rest of their lifespan. Does the right hon. Gentleman think the Government should look at conditions that particularly affect people and start by focusing on those as a priority, as the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, said?

Sir Vince Cable: The hon. Lady is quite right. We are talking about a variety of conditions. I listed some, and Parkinson's is clearly one. With Parkinson's, it is difficult to separate the health and the social element, which is one of the problems with a lot of these conditions and why the current distinction is so arbitrary and unsatisfactory.

Perhaps I could finish with a quotation from Her Majesty the Queen, although it does not relate to her need for social care. Two and a half years ago she made a speech in which she said:

"My Ministers will work to improve social care and will bring forward proposals for consultation."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 June 2017; Vol. 783, c. 6.]

That was two and a half years ago, and the basic question is: where are they?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. We have lots of people. I am going to start with a time limit of four minutes, but do not be surprised when I drop it to three.

2.51 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles.

I think we all accept that there is an ever-increasing demand for social care. In fact, when I was looking at data for this speech, I found out that 5,000 people a day are trying to access social care, according to NHS Digital. However, we sometimes forget the human being behind the figures, and although I was not going to use this story in my speech, it has stayed with me, and I want to share it with Members.

A couple of weeks ago, I knocked on a family's door. I was talking to the woman there, and she told me about her sister. She was really keen for me to read some research about why adults with learning difficulties die earlier than adults without, when there is no physical reason for that to happen. She told me that, despite being the younger sister, she had helped her older sister

to learn how to speak and that, when she was younger, she had helped to look after her. She used to visit her, and they were very close, despite the fact that her sister had numerous learning difficulties.

Two years ago, however, the sister died, at the age of 51. The woman was clearly still very upset. She said her sister had died because there was no reason for her to get up any more. There was no reason for her to get out of bed; there was nothing for her to do. She said that her sister had been involved years ago in volunteer work placements, and that she would get really excited when she earned her money and was given a bit of a wage at the end of the day—she felt like she had a reason to get up. The woman told me there used to be activity co-ordinators in the care homes, who went in and did work and activities such as gardening and all sorts of other things. However, over the past few years, everything has gone. She said there was no reason for her sister to want to be alive, so she stayed in bed. Her condition degenerated, and she developed serious health conditions, which resulted in her passing away at only the age of 51.

We sometimes forget about those things. We talk about care, and we ask whether 15 minutes is enough to go and care for someone. It might be enough to stick a meal in the microwave, and it might be enough to give someone their medication, but is it enough to care? It feels like we have lost the caring from our caring system. We have lost the time to actually sit down and be with each other and to have that human contact and human care.

As automation increases, it feels like that human interaction could disappear even more. For example, there are fantastic new homes that are run by voice activation. People can tell them to open the curtains or the drawers. All these advances in technology are a reason to decrease the amount of human interaction, and I worry about that. I worry about where we are going as a society. We are replacing humans with automation, and we are replacing caring with just functioning. It feels like we have developed a system where people function but do not get cared for.

We need a fundamental rethink. The time for tinkering around the edges has definitely ended. I am obviously pleased with the Labour party's proposals for free personal care. I hope we look at giving those free personal carers the time to care, and give the quality and status to carers, so that instead of their being dismissed as insignificant people on the minimum wage they are given that quality and status. We should view our carers in the same way as we view our nurses—as people giving a quality service and making a difference to our society.

It is time for us all to put the care back into caring, raise the status of the profession and give people the time they need, and I am very proud that that is exactly what the Labour party intends to do.

2.55 pm

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles.

It is also a pleasure to participate in this debate, albeit briefly, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) for her very well-founded comments and to the right

[Dr Dan Poulter]

hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) for securing this debate. It is indeed good to be talking about something other than Brexit.

This issue is the biggest piece of unfinished business not just of this Government or the coalition Government, but of the Governments of Gordon Brown and Tony Blair, because the concept of social care reform has been discussed in this place and more broadly in the country for many years. The right hon. Gentleman was right to recognise that many care providers face serious structural and numerical challenges in providing adequate numbers of people who want to work in the care sector. He was right to highlight the funding challenges that the care sector faces, which began about 15 years ago but have increased over the last few years. He was also right to highlight the fact that there is often a vocalised mantra of political consensus in this area but that when it comes to legislation or any sensible, proposal being made there is a failure in practice to deliver that political consensus, so as to deliver reform to the people on the ground who actually need care.

The care sector faces short-term funding pressures. I know that the Government will want to address some of those challenges by putting extra money into the system and supporting local authorities in providing better care, because we know that we have put local authorities into a position whereby they, and indeed the care sector, have faced very straitened financial circumstances for many years.

At the same time as talking about extra funding, however, we should talk about what sort of care system we want to see, because far too often the debate boils down to the funding discussion, when the reality is that we should also talk about how we want to deliver care. We should understand and put right the commissioning of care services. It seems extraordinary to me, given that we often talk about the benefits for people with long-term medical conditions of better integrated health and social care, that we have two different commissioning systems: local authorities commission local care; and the NHS commissions the health service. In their interventions today, many contributors have made the point that we are dealing with the same people with the same problems, but they are being dealt with in a fractured manner by two systems.

We must fundamentally deal with that issue of how we commission services, and the only way we will deliver improved care—care that is centred on the whole person—and dispense with fractured care is by having one point of commissioning. Unless we have that, we will end up putting more money into a system that, yes, needs to continue doing what it is doing at the moment, but it will still be a system that fundamentally is not the right one to deliver the right care for the people whom we care about.

At the moment, social care often duplicates the functions of the NHS, even when we are dealing with the same person. It is very difficult for families to understand why, on the one side, someone has undergone a life-changing medical event such as a stroke or severe dementia, yet some of their care is delivered not by the NHS but by social care. So, yes, let us put more money into the system, but let us also consider how we can have a better commissioning system and unified commissioning for the benefit of patients.

2.59 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I will start by talking a little about my experience as a nurse on an in-patient cardiac ward and the number of times we saw delayed discharges. Delayed discharges happened when a patient was medically fit for discharge, had had all their assessments, had received physio and had seen the occupational therapist, and we knew what they needed, but because there was no social care provision, they could not go. Dr Andrews or Dr Kelly would tell them on a Friday afternoon that they could go home, and I used to think, “I’m going to be the one who tells them that they can’t.” Patients really hated that. There was also a cost to it; in cardiology—an acute setting—people would be waiting for a cardiac bed. We might have to choose to outlie that patient in a non-specialty area. We just did not have the beds. It was a constant juggling act.

I was really pleased to hear the announcement last week at the Labour party conference about the national care service; it will play a huge part in relieving the pressures on the NHS. Our NHS is in crisis; the Conservative party will say that it is not, but I still meet my friends for supper once a month, and it is. Part of that crisis is the fact that we have so many people sitting in beds, waiting for social care.

If people get decent social care in their homes when they are discharged, they will not bounce back into hospital so quickly, because there will be someone going into their home every day and keeping an eye on them. I know this from my experience with my mum. If someone is keeping an eye on them, they get to a doctor more quickly, and they are not as acutely ill when they are readmitted, as they very often ultimately are.

Elderly people face significant challenges these days in accessing a general practitioner. The GP service in Skellingthorpe, a village near me, is to be shut; it will be really hard for elderly people there to get to a GP, so they will just get more and more ill before they get to hospital.

Another important point is that when people need increased support, it should be provided by staff who are properly trained, paid and valued. Someone mentioned staff on low wages earlier. I will not utter the dreaded B-word, but when that happens, how will we provide social care, given that none of the staff we are talking about earn £30,000 a year? Labour has come up with a way. Last week, we said that people who earn over £80,000 will pay a little bit more in tax. Surely it is right that the wealthiest in society pay a little bit towards keeping the most vulnerable people safe; I know that does not go down too well with some people, but I think that that is only fair. It is also good to hear that undervalued carers who are struggling will get proper financial support in line with jobseeker’s allowance. We will introduce a cap on care costs for catastrophic illness.

I agree with everything said by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy). I have a little grandson—I say little; he is 13—who has Down’s syndrome, and one of the worries of my life has been what will happen to him when we are gone. It is really important that people with learning difficulties are provided for. I completely agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham

(Sir Vince Cable); Joe used to go to all sorts of little clubs and things like that, and they have all gone. Things are really basic now. All that is viewed as a commodity. It is as though we do not care about people; it is all about how much things cost. I am sorry, I think my disgust for that view is probably apparent.

Providing social care for an increasing elderly population, as well as many others across our society, is one of the biggest challenges facing us. I am really pleased that my right hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham brought forward this debate. It is really important that we talk about the issue cross-party, because it is a problem that we all face, and we need to come up with answers.

3.3 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I appreciate the opportunity to talk about something other than Brexit, and to talk constructively, to have a proper debate on the facts, to look at each other's positions and, I hope, to try to find a middle way. I think it was Lord Tebbit who said that politics was about shooting the crocodile nearest the boat. This crocodile is about to swallow the whole boat. There are three big, ticking time-bombs, all connected to demographics: pensions, healthcare and social care. According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, our national debt is about 80% of GDP. By 2060, unless we look at this issue strategically and change our taxes dramatically, our debt-to-GDP ratio will be 280%. This is not something that we can just put a sticking plaster over and hope it will be okay.

I do not mean to be critical of the Opposition's policies, but they are moving down the road of free personal care. The difficulty with that is the question of its affordability. We have to understand the sheer scale of the problem. Perhaps, once they do, they will still have the same perspective. Another point is that there is no such thing as "free", of course. If something is free, it is funded by the taxpayer. Taxes would have to go up significantly to do what is being suggested. The right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) talked about putting a penny on income tax, which will raise about £5.5 billion, but he acknowledges that the gap will already be about £8 billion in three or four years' time. The scale of the problem is huge, and it will simply grow, so we need to look at the facts behind it.

The Health and Social Care Committee and the Communities and Local Government Committee held a constructive inquiry into all those issues and came up with a German-style social insurance premium. I felt that was the most sustainable, simple and scalable option that tackled the future as well as the past.

Germany introduced the system in 1995 and has already revised the level of contributions once. Since 2005, it has increased the percentage of total take from the premium by 56%, at a time when our resources have been decreasing. That shows that this can work on a cross-party basis. It is a simple system based on a percentage of somebody's income. It is not actually put on national insurance, which I would not advocate, because we would go back, in a future Budget, to arguing about who could put the most on national insurance and who could spend the most on it.

It is an independent system in which people are categorised according to need, so it is possible to calculate exactly how much needs to be raised. In future, we can

come to a cross-party agreement about by how much we need to increase the premium, because we will have to increase it. Everybody pays a small amount from their income—not just their salary, so it is for retired people as well. It is also mandatory, which tackles the insurance problem, because the insurance market will not work unless there is universal cover, and it is handled by not-for-profit insurance companies.

The key element in the system is that, when someone is categorised as needing care, they can pay for provision, ask their local authority or provider to give them care, or draw down the money and pay it to a relative or neighbour, so they get care from the people who care for them most and understand them best. That also helps to tackle the staffing element. If we have a system where everybody pays something, nobody has to give everything.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Everybody is being so disciplined about interventions, which is great. Faisal Rashid, you, too, can have four minutes, but nobody else will.

3.7 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. Making sure that the sick and elderly are treated with care is the measure of any civilised society. I believe that we should not be judged by our personal wealth, but by our compassion for those in most need. Clearly, however, that ethos is not shared by our Government.

As we speak, 1.4 million older people are going without the care they need, which is totally unacceptable. We are faced with the huge challenge of meeting the increasingly complex care needs of an ageing population, yet as those needs have increased and intensified, state funding for those services has nosedived. Council budgets have been reduced by an average of nearly 50% since the Tories came to power. Those cuts have taken a staggering £7.7 billion out of social care funding since 2010.

In my constituency, Warrington Borough Council has had £137 million cut from its budget with another at least £22 million of savings to find by 2020. As a former new town, we are seeing a significant increase in our vulnerable older population—those who were drawn to Warrington for work and a better life in the 1970s and 1980s. Nationally, there are 8,000 fewer care home beds than in 2015, despite the kind of rising demand seen in my constituency. Reports indicate that, last year, almost 90 people a day died while waiting for care to be arranged for them at home. That is absolutely shameful. How can the Minister justify those figures?

The crisis in social care is felt by not just those in need of care, but their families and friends who must step in where the state has failed and where money is short. More than 5 million unpaid carers look after loved ones. Skills for Care has found an 8% vacancy rate in the social care sector, which is equal to 110,000 empty roles at any one time. Many who work in the social care sector are overworked and underpaid. Unison has documented at length the injustices faced by those who do such vital work: sleep-ins, impossible rotas, zero-hours contracts and unpaid travel time, to name just a few.

[Faisal Rashid]

Make no mistake: this policy area is crippled by Government inaction and market failure, causing immense hardship and misery for those who need care and for those who provide it. It is high time our political leaders showed the courage necessary to rise to the challenge and fix this mess, ensured the safety and security of older generations and treated care workers with the respect they deserve. I am proud that my party has recently announced bold, radical plans to do just that.

Labour will introduce personal care free at the point of use in England funded through general taxation. Providing free personal care to older people will ensure that they will be able to live in their own homes for longer, providing them with dignity and the support to lead independent lives for as long as possible. I have seen at first hand from my mum, who passed away last year, how that is absolutely crucial.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Speeches are now limited to three minutes.

3.11 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I started the year encouraged by the 10-year plan and now by this weekend's infrastructure investment. They are both welcome. Certainly, in Cornwall and on the Isles of Scilly, there is an ambition and enthusiasm for how they can use such opportunities to put right the challenges that we have. We all recognise, as has already been said this afternoon, that everything hinges on how we effectively and appropriately care for people in old age and people who need social care during their working lives.

The Minister might be interested to know something that I heard recently: care homes, including charitable care homes in Cornwall, have beds. Our urgent care centre closed its doors to new admissions not long ago because it had people in beds who needed to be elsewhere at a time when beds were available. However long we need to wait for the Green Paper—I really hope it comes soon because it is getting embarrassing now—I hope the Minister will ask searching questions of areas such as Cornwall, where beds are available in one place and individuals who should be in those beds. The system is under enormous pressure.

When it comes to the Green Paper—we have heard this already—there needs to be clarity and fairness. For example, why do we think that dementia is an issue for social care and not use NHS funds to properly care for people? As has already been said, it would lead to far better care and support for families and also reduce the burden in the cost of such care. Also, who pays? Why is it that someone who is funded by the state costs a certain amount of money, but if for some reason circumstances change and their family needs to fund their care, the cost of their care leaps by enormous amounts in just a weekend. Why, if it is state-funded, is it a matter of hundreds of pounds, but if it is privately funded, is it a matter of thousands for the same care?

Will the Minister look at some of the solutions that we are trying to bring forward in Cornwall? We have a health and care academy. There is an enthusiasm to train people in Cornwall to work in nursing and domiciliary care. Part of the challenge is that the cost of doing that,

even using the apprenticeship levy, makes it not possible for everyone who wants to do it, but in Cornwall we need people to train locally so that they stay local.

Finally, I was on Scilly on Friday where urgent healthcare, GPs and social care have been brought together. A business case has been put to bring everything together in one place so that people do not need to leave the Isles of Scilly to get the care that can easily be provided at home. Again, it would reduce the cost and the pressure on the workforce, who at the moment are stretched all over the place. Will the Minister look at that plan to see how we can find some funding to make that integration become a reality on the Isles of Scilly?

3.14 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on securing this important debate. In the limited time that I have, I will concentrate on a couple of realities. Every colleague in the room knows that social care is on its knees and has been for a long time. I appreciated the intervention from the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee), who said that she was a nurse before she became an MP. My partner is a community matron. She works out in the community with patients alongside social care, and she sees for herself how bad it is, as every Member here does. I have had numerous bits of casework dealing with the profound challenges in social care, so we know that it is on its knees.

Politically, because of cuts over a number of years to the money it receives from Government, East Sussex County Council has been cutting meals on wheels, rehabilitation houses and much more. I pay tribute to my colleague Councillor John Unger, who has been lobbying, harrying and fighting the county council to stop the cuts, but it has not made a lot of difference. Why not? Because it is on its knees. Social care is a massive issue, and all of us in the Chamber know that the only way to deal with it properly is to depoliticise it—I have a view on doing that with the NHS, but that is for another day. If we do not depoliticise social care, we will be in exactly the same position in five years' time.

The real frustration and challenge is that, as MPs, we know how difficult it is out there for people in receipt of social care—or not, as the case may be. The same is true for those such as myself whose partners are nurses and others. Similarly, one of our colleagues is a doctor and would have seen things for himself. The challenge is that normal, ordinary people out there do not realise how bad it is until they need social care, and then—my God, it is a car crash. They come into my office and say, “Stephen, I cannot believe the service, or the lack of it, that my mum”—or dad, or grandad—“is receiving.” They are in bits, and until we can find a way to inform the rest of the public—85% to 90%, say; I do not know—just how awful things are, I believe we will just keep getting stuck.

There have been good ideas—we had good ideas in the Dilnot report and the coalition; Labour has come up with some good ideas, and free personal care in Scotland has real mileage—but the truth is that we will need to depoliticise social care. I therefore urge the House to recognise that, after this bloomin' Brexit and the election, whatever the hell happens—I hope that I

will be here to continue urging—we will have to depoliticise social care, otherwise it will never improve and our people will suffer.

3.17 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): Today, we are looking at a question that is certainly as vexing as that faced by Nye Bevan when he looked at how we would fund health. As has been said, the need for social care is increasing across our population—for older people, younger people, working people and retired people. It is a good thing that we live longer, but we have to recognise that that fundamentally changes how we as a society might address that need. The answer, in my view, is not simply to throw money at it. Money is clearly part of the solution, but this is a complex puzzle, and when we consider that our system has remained largely unchanged for 50 years, I think it is time for another Nye Bevan moment.

We therefore need to identify the true scope of the issue. There is much hidden need, particularly in isolated rural areas such as mine in Devon. What is the best way of delivering? I chair a national inquiry into rural health and care. It is taking two years to deliver, and it is clear that there are issues with different geographies that can be dealt with more efficiently and effectively with different methodologies. We need to look at how technology can be better used. We should look at how we might train and motivate people across both health and social care, and there has to be parity of esteem between the two.

We need to look also at how the community can be engaged. That is not, in this case, just about money. Sometimes, it is not about money but about a willingness to be part of that community. North Devon was cut off during the extreme winter two years ago, but people survived because they pulled together as a community. That is the sort of resilience that we have to build in.

We have to find something efficient and effective. We have to be honest about the cost. I agree that we need to help society to understand that, and we therefore need to understand what the right contribution is from the individual, family, community and taxpayer. We talk about integrating health and social care, but right now the challenge is that we have two systems that are funded in very different ways. The five reports that we have had so far have looked only at the social care problem, but it is naive to think that we can look at it in isolation. What we need now is a report on integrating both the provision and commissioning of health and care. That we have not done.

Dilnot looked at one side of the problem, and we have had other inquiries looking at integrating commissioning and provision, but that is not enough. It seems to me that we need to commission an integration report across health and social care. We need to deliver parity of esteem. We need to identify the barriers to integrating those systems, and remove them. Duplication of regulators and organisations does not work. What is the true cost? What is the best way to share that burden? How do we look at insurance, savings and taxation? But that will take time, and I support the view that in the short term we need to look at domiciliary care. I believe that we could integrate that into primary care and that it should be free, whether it is funded through tax, savings or some other mechanism.

3.20 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) for introducing this debate. I will be talking about children's social care, with the forgiveness of his introduction on adult social care.

In Plymouth, our children's social care system is on its knees, not just because of the cuts that my colleagues have spoken about; it is down to a very small number of exceptionally expensive young people who have needed social care. The exceptional costs are not unique to Plymouth, but in Plymouth we have had a number of them at the same time, resulting in severe budget pressures. One of those young people cost £50,000 a week in social care and required six-on-one care as ordered by the court. I stress that it is not that young person's fault and no blame should be attached to them or their family, but that level of cost, for small councils with small budgets such as Plymouth's, is exceptional.

I have met some of the Minister's colleagues to talk about those exceptional costs and whether there is a possibility that, in those exceptional circumstances, the Government might look at applying the Bellwin scheme, which covers exceptional costs in the event of a natural disaster, to extend to something that is not normally acceptable within the budget. I think there is a possibility here, and I would be grateful if the Minister thought about whether there is a point where we can look at the exceptional care costs—of others as well, but especially of young people—and say, "Actually, it is unreasonable to take resources away from other children in that locality to apply to this." I am grateful for the Ministers who have looked at this before. We do not yet have the answer, but I think there is a possibility of working around this.

Young people are not only, in many cases, receiving the care here, but giving social care. In my last minute, I will mention young carers, because in every single part of the country they are providing tens of thousands of hours of care to young people, to elder folks and to people with learning disabilities. Their role in the overall social care scheme needs to be understood, because they are not getting the support. In many cases, they are giving up time when they could be doing homework, socialising, learning or just being themselves to care in settings that they are not trained or equipped for.

I would like to see the Government encourage schools to start counting who in their school is a young carer. Many of the schools in Plymouth have started to do so and, my word, the results are scary—they show just how many of our young people are taking on exceptional burdens. There is a question about how we can provide additional, wrap-around support for those families and in particular for those young people who are doing something really exceptional in supporting and caring for their loved ones. That is an area that I would like to see included in the Green Paper, whenever it comes out, because in the case of exceptional care costs for young people, and of young carers themselves, there is much work to be done.

3.23 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We hold this debate against the severe cuts we have seen in local authorities, with £7.7 billion taken out of the

[*Rachael Maskell*]

budget. Of course, we had the Dilnot report in 2011 and the promise of a social care Bill in 2012. In 2015, we had a manifesto promise; in 2017, we had the promise of a paper and then a disgraceful offer in the manifesto. In 2018, we were promised a Green Paper before the summer, before the autumn, by Christmas, in the new year and then “soon”, and then it was summer again in 2019, and of course this Green Paper has not seen the light of day. Meanwhile, 1.4 million people are not getting the care they need and 87 people each day die before they get the care they desperately need.

I want to tell the story of Mr Stewart, in my constituency. The love of his life, Nancy—they have been married for more than 60 years—was taken into hospital and then discharged to a care home. He wanted her home, and it was refused and refused, and then an inadequate trial was done without the right care support in place. He longed to have her back at home, but she was permanently moved to a care home outside Harrogate, which is over 20 miles away, and each visit costs £88. City of York Council will pay for him to visit his wife once a week, but he wants to spend his whole life with her. He pays for two additional visits despite not having the means, but the visits are all too short. He cannot afford to go every day; he cannot afford to live with her; and he cannot afford to have her cared for at home. The system is broken, and poor Mr Stewart has been broken by the system. Hope came last week when Labour announced that it will pay for the personal care that people need, which would enable Mr Stewart to live with his wife. It is right that we reform our care system and turn it into a therapeutic system as we do so.

I praise our diligent careworkers, but we must end the pressure placed on them by zero-hours contracts and short visits. They need time to care and to apply their expertise. Training should be put in their hands, so that they can be at the frontline of delivering care with confidence. I worked as a carer, so I know what it is like to work under that pressure. I then moved on to be a physiotherapist, and trying to discharge people into the system was a massive challenge. We need to respect our careworkers and pay them well. No more talking; we will make it happen. It is the right thing to do. It is the Labour thing to do.

3.26 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (LD): I begin by paying tribute to all the family carers and the care workforce, including those who looked after my mother-in-law Mary. It was only with their support that she was able to die where she wished: at home, surrounded by her loved ones. That support is not available to everybody, but it should be. For the want of good social care, far too many people unnecessarily end up in far more expensive hospital settings. We must act quickly, and I hope that the Minister will update us on when the Government will come forward with their consultative social care Green Paper, because it was promised two and a half years ago. Five publication deadlines have been missed, so when will we see that Green Paper?

I also hope that the Minister will confirm that she has looked at the Joint Select Committee inquiry by the Health and Social Care Committee and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, because

the proposals provide a blueprint for how to move things forward. It contains practical suggestions that have been road-tested for their acceptability through a citizens assembly. I hope that she will also confirm that the principles set out in the document will form part of the Green Paper.

I am afraid that I am going to disappoint my right hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), who said that this debate provided an opportunity not to talk about Brexit, because Brexit poses a grave threat to a fragile sector. The Yellowhammer documents make it clear that smaller providers face going to the wall within two to three months and larger providers within four to six months. I hope that the Minister will be able to comment on what action will be taken to mitigate that.

The effects include not only the impact of an increase in inflation on a fragile sector, but the impact on the workforce. As the Minister knows, the vacancy rate is already at 8%, which amounts to around 110,000 positions across social care. Some 8% of the workforce come from our partner EU27 nations, and many workers are deciding that it is no longer economically viable for them to remain in the UK due to changes in the exchange rate. Several careworkers have told me in tears that they no longer feel welcome in this country, which is horrific and should make us all feel a sense of great shame, but that is the reality. People face racist remarks in our country today despite decades of service to the most vulnerable in society. We cannot afford to lose them. We need to set out what will happen to ensure that the people in this workforce, many of whom will not meet the income thresholds, will be able to come here, share their skills with us and be welcomed.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Thank you, colleagues. We now move to the Front-Bench speeches.

3.29 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) for securing what has been a well attended and thoughtful debate.

The Office for Budget Responsibility assessed the UK's public finances as potentially £30 billion worse off each year in a no-deal Brexit scenario of medium disruptiveness. That sum is significant because it is more than the entire sum spent on adult social care, plus investment in NHS buildings and equipment, across the United Kingdom in 2017-18. Much of the responsibility for social care is, of course, devolved, with respect to Scotland. The Scottish National party Scottish Government are currently working with a range of partners to take forward a national programme to support local reform of adult social care support. Scotland continues to be the only country in the UK that delivers free personal care. That currently benefits more than 77,000 older and disabled people in Scotland.

In England since 2010 the number of people receiving publicly funded social care has decreased by 600,000, because of funding cuts. In 2019-20 the SNP Scottish Government are increasing their package of investment and social care support and integration to exceed £700 million, up from £550 million in the previous year.

In England a boundary has always existed between the NHS and social care, contributing to fragmented and unco-ordinated care. In Scotland the SNP Scottish Government successfully integrated health and social care, which is the most significant change to health and social care since the creation of the NHS in 1948. Last month the First Minister announced that everyone diagnosed with cancer will have a dedicated support worker, provided through a new £18 million partnership fund.

Of course, the devolved Administrations do not operate in isolation. Policy decisions from Westminster continue to have an impact on social care. The independent expert advisory group in Scotland deems that changes set out in the UK Government's immigration White Paper would reduce net migration to Scotland by between 30% and 50% in the coming two decades. That is extremely significant. It states that social care would be severely affected as fewer than 10% of those in caring personal service occupations in Scotland earn above £25,000, and almost no one earns over the £30,000 immigration threshold. Average earnings of adult social care workers are higher in Scotland than they are elsewhere in the UK, coming in at about £18,400 as opposed to £17,300. Yet people are thinking about a £30,000 immigration limit. Just let those figures sink in. Thanks to Scottish Government funding, staff can be paid at least the real living wage, but it is still nowhere near the immigration threshold. That is a serious worry in respect of future provision throughout the UK, not just Scotland.

The number of Scots over 80 with social care needs is set to increase by 68% by 2036. That is probably an even faster rate than the English figures that we have heard from some hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) called for an independent evaluation of the impact of Brexit on the health and social care sector, through his private Member's Bill, the European Union Withdrawal (Evaluation of Effects on Health and Social Care Sectors) Bill. The Bill was supported across the House and by 102 organisations, but I wonder whether the UK Government are listening.

On 18 August *The Sunday Times*, citing UK Government planning assumptions under Yellowhammer, stated:

"An already 'fragile' social care system is expected to be tipped over the edge by a no-deal, with providers starting to go bust by the new year".

The report quoted the document as saying that "smaller providers" would be

"impacted within two-three months and large providers four-six months"

after Brexit. The negative economic impact of a disorderly Brexit, including an increase in inflation and an economic recession, will augment the pressure on providers and will shift the burden of care work on to unpaid family carers, the majority of whom are women. I look forward to hearing the Minister address those points, particularly on the issue of migrant staff and the £30,000 immigration limit.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I want to give Sir Vince Cable two minutes at the end, so if the other Front-Bench colleagues could maintain a 12-minute discipline, or just under, that would be great.

3.34 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in a debate with you in the Chair, Sir Charles. I think that this is the first time I have done so. I join others in congratulating the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on securing this important debate.

The number of Members contributing in this debate makes clear the appetite to speak on the matter, and it is a pity that more Government time—or even an Opposition day debate—has not been allocated. It is appropriate that on this International Day of Older Persons we have talked largely, though not entirely, about older people. That should remind us all that growing old with dignity is a fundamental right that we should all enjoy.

By my count we have heard 12 Back-Bench speeches and six interventions, and by the time we get to the Minister we will have heard three Front-Bench speakers. Many have rightly focused on the cuts to social care budgets and the harm caused to people who rely on and need social care. We have heard powerful examples of the impact of those cuts. That harm, however, is not inevitable. If social care is properly funded and delivered well, it can be life changing. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) gave an example of how life can be changed in the wrong way if social care is not available.

Social care can keep someone connected to their community rather than isolated and lonely. It can support people to live the lives they want to live, rather than just survive from day to day—sometimes not even that—when the care disappears. But that is not what our social care system looks like today. Over the past nine years nearly £8 billion has been taken out of local councils' social care budgets as a result of cuts. Hon. Members have mentioned the swingeing cuts experienced by many local authorities. As a result, hundreds of thousands fewer people are receiving the care they need. That is the straightforward result of the cuts.

Age UK tells us that 1.4 million older people in this country are struggling with everyday activities. Whether that means getting washed or eating a meal, they are not getting the help they should be getting. Older people are being left trapped in bed all day and perhaps going unwashed all week because their children can visit them only on weekends. They are having only microwave meals, because that is all their neighbours or family friends have the time to buy in for them. That is not what this country's older and disabled people deserve.

I am glad that many hon. Members have mentioned the immense pressure that the state of our care system puts on unpaid carers. Wherever the Government pull back from funding social care properly, the UK's millions of unpaid carers have to step in. As we have heard, that includes young carers in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). It is very important to identify and support those young carers. I have tried three times to bring in legislation, including to identify young carers. The Minister's predecessor did not support it, but we could still do it. I might give the Bill to my hon. Friend so that he can resurrect it.

It is a dire picture, including for young carers. Half of unpaid carers now spend 50 hours a week providing care, while 38% spend 100 hours of every week caring.

[Barbara Keeley]

One quarter of carers have not received any support, either for themselves or for the person they care for. Two thirds of carers say that they do not get as much social contact as they would like with other people. More than eight in 10 say that they cannot spend time doing things that they enjoy or value, and 40% of carers say that they have not had a day off for more than a year. In fact, a recent Carers UK report noted carers saying that if they had a respite care break, they would use it to visit their own GP for a medical appointment, which is very sad.

Even for the smaller number of people who manage to get a social care package, cuts mean that the care provided will not be of the quality expected. One in five social care services has been rated by the Care Quality Commission as either “inadequate” or “requires improvement”. The number of complaints to the local government ombudsman about social care provision has trebled since 2010, rising to more than 3,000, and two thirds of those complaints are upheld. There is very much wrong with our system. I find it deeply concerning that one in five care homes, housing as many as 9,000 older and disabled people, are now rated as unsafe.

These are not services that any of us would like a family member to have to rely on. The situation can mean care homes that are so unclean that residents are at risk of infection, or residents being at risk of malnutrition because nobody is monitoring what they are eating. Care in one's own home can mean visits by staff who have not been subject to basic checks or who have not completed any training. It can mean staff being so rushed that they do not have time to take off their coat while they are getting people up and dressed. The reality is that some care providers cannot provide high-quality services with the funding available; sadly, other providers choose to protect profit margins rather than the people who use their services.

That issue is clearest in the social care workforce. There are 1.4 million people—or there would be, if the vacancies were filled—working in social care. These people provide vital support day in, day out, but they simply do not get the respect they deserve for the work they do. More than a quarter of those care staff work for a minimum wage, and the same proportion of the workforce are on zero-hours contracts. It is no surprise therefore that there are 110,000 vacancies in the care sector. Those important issues have been touched on by many Members in this debate.

Rather than providing the empathetic care that they want to offer, care staff are often reduced to visits lasting 15 minutes or less. They must rush through their tasks with barely any time to talk to the person they are visiting. This deterioration in the quality of care is the result of nearly a decade of cuts, care staff stretched to breaking point and services that barely deserve to be called “care”. Hundreds of thousands of people have to go without basic support.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and paints a picture of social care in this country. On 15-minute visits, does she agree that the issue is not just the time limit but the ever-changing individual presence? With vulnerable people, consistency of care and the ability to build up a relationship are equally important.

Barbara Keeley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. For people with dementia and learning disabilities, seeing a familiar face every day can be crucial.

We cannot allow this crisis to continue. We must see action to ensure that everyone is able to access the care that they need to live with dignity. That is why Labour has announced that we would introduce free personal care for all older people who need it and expand such provision to working-age adults as soon as possible. That would end the scandal of people having to sell their home to pay for basic care. We will fund social care in the only fair, sustainable and understandable way—through general taxation. That is how we fund our NHS and our schools, and it is how Labour will fund our national care service.

Before we can build this new system, we must also repair the damage caused by years of budget cuts. We will invest £8 billion in more care packages, in improved training and in better community support. The apprenticeship levy is not enough for training; skills for care should be better funded.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Barbara Keeley: I do not have time.

A few months ago, we pledged £350 million a year for community resources, aimed specifically at helping to bring autistic people and those with learning disabilities out of in-patient units—over 2,000 of them—in which they are trapped. It is a scandal that we do not have the social care and community resources that are needed to prevent people being trapped in abusive care. Time and again, the reason given for people being in those units is that there is no resource in the community. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport has spoken about the burden that falls on social care authorities if they end up with a very expensive case. We have to get round that.

We can fix the crisis in social care only by properly funding the system, as the Labour plans will do. Two years after the Conservatives' disastrous 2017 manifesto plans, which were later dropped, we are still waiting to hear what they will do. The Government's promised Green Paper has been delayed and delayed, and now it looks to many—including many in this Chamber—as if it has been dropped altogether. The hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) mentioned how embarrassing that was. It is not just embarrassing; people lose hope waiting for the care they need.

A cap on care costs, which would stop people facing catastrophic costs, and for which we legislated, was ditched by the Government in December 2017. I am sorry to say that instead the Government have provided only small, one-off cash injections—sticking plasters—rather than the long-term funding settlement that social care needs. Will the Minister tell us where the Government's proposals on social care are? If the Government want to resolve the crisis that their funding cuts have created, as I hope they do, why have they constantly kicked social care funding reform into the long grass? It is time for a solution to the crisis that this Government have created. Labour Members have pledged a way to solve the crisis, which in itself gives hope to many people who need social care.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Thank you, Minister, if you could leave two minutes at the end for Sir Vincent Cable to wind up the debate, that would be hugely appreciated.

3.45 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinanage): It is a great pleasure to serve under your stewardship in this important debate, Sir Charles, and I share the sentiment of many Members across the House in congratulating the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on securing it. I also wish to highlight the incredibly constructive and collaborative nature of the way that he opened this debate. He was right to highlight from the outset that the only way to find a solution to this thorny issue, which is not unique to our country but a challenge faced by countries around the world, is by working in a co-operative, collaborative, and constructive way.

The right hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out that successive Governments have tried and failed to deal with this thorny issue, and despite everybody recognising the need for consensus, for too long it has been weaponised. We have heard expressions such as “dementia tax” or “death tax” used by all parties over the years. That has not been helpful, and it is one reason why different parties and Governments have placed this issue in the “too difficult” pile. He was also right to highlight the sense of urgency, because we no longer have the luxury of time to place the issue in that pile.

Over the past couple of years the Government have responded to huge short-term pressures, and funding for local government has gone up, as opposed to being cut, as outlined by Labour Members. However, we must set out our long-term plans, and consider how to solve the thorny issues of long-term funding for adult social care. At the moment, one in 10 people face what we might call catastrophic care costs in excess of £100,000, and potentially lose their home to pay for their long-term care.

I thank hon. Members across the House who have spoken with great passion and, in most cases, an enormous amount of collaboration and desire to work together to find solutions to these problems. I join them in recognising and paying tribute to the carers, nurses, social workers, and unpaid friends and families of those who require care. Every day, carers work tirelessly to ensure that people live dignified and full lives, regardless of how tough that challenge is. In doing this job and fulfilling this role, it has been my greatest privilege to meet those people on an almost daily basis and hear their stories. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) said that carers must be accorded the status that they deserve, and given resources to drive the right amount of quality, and she was absolutely right. She was wrong, however, to say that we have lost caring from the caring system. People may be driven to that point in some respects, but they care and they do so in the most beautiful way.

Jamie Stone: May I associate myself with what the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) said about young carers who go home and look after parents who may have an alcohol or drug dependency problem? In my constituency an organisation called The Young Carers East Sutherland

helps to support them. My mother died four years ago, but she was cared for at home very well. The younger carers—those who had left school and gone into the profession for the first time—were the most amazing. They embraced this profession, and one could see they had a vocation. I suggest that one way to sort out this problem is to encourage the recruitment of young people by giving them taster sessions and letting them come from school and see what it is like. Often, we might get converts who will stay in the profession for life.

Caroline Dinanage: That is an excellent intervention, and the hon. Gentleman is right to say that we must do more to recognise and support young carers. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport said that we must do more to help schools to identify young carers, and that was a key part of the carers action plan that was announced last summer. A young carers’ takeover day of Parliament is planned in the months ahead: every MP across the country will be encouraged to invite a young carer from their constituency, which will give us a real in-depth understanding of what an amazing job young carers do.

We all recognise the challenges that the social care system faces. As a population, we are getting older: by 2040, one in four people in the UK will be 65 or over, as the right hon. Member for Twickenham pointed out. It is also important to understand that social care is not just a service for older people; the number of people under 65 who have carers is growing and accounts for more than half of social care spending. That can have quite a disastrous impact on local authority budgets, as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport pointed out. I will certainly take forward the points that he made.

These long-standing trends put increasing financial pressure on local authorities. In response, we have taken steps to ensure that the social care system has the funding to meet urgent challenges in the short term. In 2017, we announced an additional £2 billion in grant funding for social care, which we supplemented with a further £650 million in the 2018 Budget. Councils have responded by increasing their spending on social care, which has risen in real terms in each of the past three years.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Dinanage: I will make some progress, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind.

As a result of our investment in social care, 65% of local authorities were able to increase home care provision in 2017-18. Local authorities have increased the average fee paid for older people’s home care by 4.7% in 2018-19, bringing some much-needed stability to the provider market. I am very pleased that the Care Quality Commission has rated 84.1% of social care settings as good or outstanding.

I am delighted to say that in our most recent spending round we announced further investment in adult social care. We will provide councils with access to an additional £1.5 billion for adult and children’s social care next year, including £1 billion in new grant funding over and above the £2.5 billion of existing social care grants. In the spending round, we confirmed that all the existing

[Caroline Dinenage]

funding streams would be maintained next year—hard-wired into the Budget, if you like. The Government will also consult on a 2% adult social care precept that will enable councils to access a further £500 million. This increase in funding is part of the biggest increase since 2015 in overall core spending power for local government: it will increase by 4.3% in real terms next year.

The new funding from the spending round will support local authorities in meeting the rising demands that they face, while helping them to continue to stabilise the wider social care market. This additional funding is the first step towards putting adult social care on a fairer and more sustainable footing. We have already started preparing for the multi-year spending round due next year.

The challenges facing social care are not purely financial, as hon. Members across the parties, including my hon. Friends the Members for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) and for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris), have said. It is important to point that out, because stakeholders across the sector tell MPs: “Even if money were no object, we would not necessarily continue to provide this service in the current system.” The current system is not working in so many respects, and it is not working properly for some of our most vulnerable citizens, which is why we are continuing to support the system through a programme of sector-led improvements to help councils to make better use of funding to deliver high-quality personalised service, with more than £9.2 million committed by the Department in 2019-20.

We are also breaking down barriers to encourage much better integration of health and care, and we are looking at what more we can do to support the workforce and carers, as I have mentioned. In terms of integration, the better care fund has helped to enable much better co-operation between health and social care partners at a local level. It has also been instrumental in reducing delayed transfers of care, which has been mentioned: they have decreased by 2,147 since February 2017. We are looking at how we can use the fund to drive better integration.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) spoke about bed vacancies and people stuck in hospitals. There is a lot more integration going on between care providers and health settings that are using those beds to provide the step-down care and discharge to assess that we want to see.

Dr Poulter: The better care fund and how it is applied on the ground locally varies across the country. Overall, the impact has been disappointing in terms of the ambition for that fund. I urge my hon. Friend to look at why there are two different commissioning systems for the NHS and social care. Unless we get that right, we are not going to drive improved integration or more personalised care.

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend is right to say there were teething problems, but in the most recent reporting cycle, 93% of local areas agreed that joint working had improved as a result of the better care

fund. We want to use it to drive much better integration and to look at how we undertake more joint commissioning in future.

We are committed to working alongside all partners in adult social care to attract and support a growing workforce with the right skills and the right values to deliver quality and compassionate care. Earlier this year, we launched the “Every Day Is Different” national adult social care recruitment campaign to raise the profile of the sector. We have secured a further £3.8 million for the next wave of that campaign, which will start later this month. We fund Skills for Care to support the sector in recruitment and retention.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Dinenage: I do not have time. We also fund the workforce development fund, and social care employers can bid for this funding to pay for their staff to gain training qualifications at all levels.

There were lots of questions raised across the Chamber, and I want to deal with them all. The hon. Member for Totnes spoke about the impact of Brexit. As the Prime Minister has said, he wants our immigration system to help to attract the brightest and best talent from across the world. This includes delivering an Australian-style points-based immigration system as a first step. The Home Secretary has commissioned an independent migration advisory committee to review this and the appropriate salary threshold. Clearly, we want to attract people to work in adult social care.

We are aware that the system is already under pressure and recognise that EU exit could add to this. We have been working on this for a long time alongside partners, including ADASS, the Local Government Association and local authorities, to ensure robust contingency plans are in place. [Interruption.] I am going to have to make progress as I will have to sit down in a second.

There is still much more to do. The funding announced in the spending round is a down payment on much more fundamental reforms to social care that we need to introduce. As the Prime Minister said on the steps of Downing Street, the Government will set out plans to fix the crisis in social care once and for all, to give every older person the dignity and security they deserve. We want to ensure that nobody has to sell their home to pay for care. The Government will not shy away from the long-term challenges that face social care. Our proactive approach to funding and reform means that we will ensure that our social care system can respond to the challenges that lie ahead with confidence that the most vulnerable in our society will be able to live with dignity and respect and receive the care they deserve.

3.58 pm

Sir Vince Cable: Sir Charles, thank you for safeguarding the last 10 minutes. I tried to approach this whole subject in a non-tribal way. I thank all the Members, including the Minister, who participated in that spirit. The debate was enriched by people drawing on professional experience, such as the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee), and those drawing powerfully on personal case experience, such as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), the hon. Member

for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd), the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) and others.

The title of this debate included the ugly word, “funding”. However good our intentions, we do have to pay for this, and I commend the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for setting out clearly and succinctly the financial constraints and a good solution through social insurance for many of these problems. I also commend the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) and the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) for pointing out that we are trying to reconcile two fundamentally different systems of funding and organisation. As we integrate the system, bringing them together is not an easy task.

Perhaps I tried too hard to be non-tribal. I thought we were trying to get a bit of respite from Brexit. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes, the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), and others pointed out, unfortunately we cannot get away from it. It has a major impact on resource availability and the labour market.

In conclusion, I wish to thank the Minister for her reply. She pointed out—and I should have acknowledged this at the beginning—that the Government have put in a little bit more in resource. However, that is growing at 2.5% while the demand is growing at 4% and the cruelty of compound interest is, I am afraid, rather powerful and painful over time.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Colleagues, thank you for sharing out the time so well.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered social care funding.

Child Poverty: Leicester

[MRS MADELEINE MOON *in the Chair*]

4.1 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered child poverty in Leicester.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon.

It is a disgrace that in the 21st century, in one of richest countries in the world—Britain—over 4 million children are growing up in poverty. In Leicester, 40,000 children are growing up poor—up 3% in the last year alone—including almost 12,000 children in my constituency. When housing costs are taken into account, 40% of children in Braunstone are growing up poor. In Abbey, it is 41%, and in New Parks it is a staggering 43%.

Those statistics, however shocking, do not tell us what growing up in poverty really means for children and families in my city. Two years ago, Leicester City Council conducted a major survey of hundreds of children and young people. One in five said they worried about having enough to eat every single day. On one of my recent weekly school visits, a primary school head told me about a child who was struggling to concentrate in class. When the teacher asked what the child had had for breakfast, he said, “Nothing”—and he had had only a bowl of salad cream for his tea the night before, because there was nothing else in the house.

Ten years ago, the organisations in Leicester that work with disadvantaged children focused on helping parents to find employment opportunities, equipping them with new skills, and providing support with parenting or help to quit smoking. Now they say they have to focus on the very basics of decent human existence—keeping a roof over people’s heads, clothes on their backs, food on the table, and the gas and electricity on. The reasons for this change are clear. They include the Government’s welfare policies, including the freeze in working-age benefits, the introduction of universal credit, and especially the five-week wait for it. There is also the shift towards in-work poverty; we have had the longest pay squeeze in 200 years, and more and more people are having to hold down several insecure jobs just to make ends meet. Appalling cuts to local council funding have decimated children’s and youth services, and vital support such as welfare advice. There is also the rising cost of living, and especially of housing. Increasing costs in the private rented sector are pushing so many children into poverty in my city.

These things have a major, immediate impact on children, but growing up poor has long-term consequences, too. When children in the most disadvantaged areas start school, they are up to 18 months behind their better-off peers in their development. They can end up playing catch-up for the rest of their life. If they live in inadequate or overcrowded housing, they often struggle to get their homework done, and are more likely to suffer from health problems such as asthma, anxiety and depression. Poor children are also less likely to be able to go on school trips or to do the extracurricular activities that many families take for granted and that are so crucial for child development.

[Liz Kendall]

A combination of all those things means that children growing up in poverty are less likely to do well at school, less likely to go on to further or higher education and less likely to earn the same salaries or to go into the same professions or vocations as young people from more advantaged backgrounds. Child poverty damages their lives and life chances, and it harms our country as a whole because we all miss out on their potential, their talents, their hopes and their dreams.

I am proud of the work we are doing in Leicester to try to tackle these problems. To give just one example, I chair the Feeding Leicester programme, which is working to end food poverty in our city. During the recent summer holidays, we provided 32,000 free meals to around 2,200 individual children across the city, predominantly in the most deprived areas. That included fresh fruit, which went down a storm. There were also lots of activities, such as sports, arts and crafts.

Unlike in previous years, we did that without any funding from the Government. We pulled together £40,000 from the city council through crowdfunding with the national Feeding Britain charity and support from De Montfort University. We had incredible help from our amazing community groups, adventure playgrounds and volunteers, without whom the holiday food programme simply would not have been possible. I know that that programme is not within the Minister's remit, but will he discuss with the Department for Education why we got no funding this year? In fact, the only place in the entire east midlands to get any Government funding was the county of Leicestershire. I am not saying that there are no poor children in Leicestershire, but the idea that the need is greater there than in Leicester, Derby or Nottingham is simply a farce. We have just heard some results from what happened in Leicestershire, and even though it got over £800,000 I am afraid that it delivered fewer free meals to fewer children than we did in Leicester. That cannot be repeated next year.

Tomorrow the organisations I work with in the feeding Leicester programme, and many others across the city, will come together to draw up a new anti-poverty strategy for people of all ages. We know we cannot tackle this problem on our own, and the Government must take action, but we are determined to do everything we possibly can.

One issue that will be raised is the serious risk that the already unacceptably high levels of poverty we face in Leicester will get even worse in the event of a no-deal Brexit. The Government's own assessment—Operation Yellowhammer—says:

“Low income groups will be disproportionately affected”

by a no-deal Brexit because of the risk of rising food and fuel prices. In other words, people who are already struggling to make ends meet will face an even bigger struggle if no deal leads to price rises. Operation Yellowhammer also says:

“Certain types of...food supply will decrease”

and that this

“will reduce availability and choice of products and will increase price, which could impact vulnerable groups.”

Food banks in Leicester have warned that a no-deal Brexit could lead to substantial increases in demand for food because more people will be struggling to make

ends meet and that that will happen at precisely the same time as the supply of food is reduced, because there will be less surplus food available from the supermarkets on which our food banks depend. And all of this could happen in the run-up to Christmas, which is the busiest time of year for food retailers anyway.

Leicester's emergency food partnership is already getting through 16 tonnes of food a month—16 tonnes of food for people who desperately need it. Action Homeless estimates that we may need to find another 8 tonnes a month in the event of no deal, yet we have no funds whatsoever to pay for that.

The Government must act to prevent the existing child poverty crisis from getting even worse in the short term, and to take the action that we desperately need to reduce child poverty in the medium to long term. There are four things that they need to do. First, we need immediate action to support our food banks. I have already raised this issue in Parliament with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), who is in charge of no-deal preparations. He said to me that he had seen no evidence that no deal would increase pressure on food banks, but I am meeting him tomorrow, along with Action Homeless and FareShare East Midlands, to raise our concerns directly with him and to ask for specific funding in the event of no deal. I ask the Minister here today: will he raise this issue with the right hon. Gentleman, too?

Secondly, the Government must make urgent improvements to help those who are already struggling on benefits and who face an even greater nightmare if Brexit leads to rising prices for food and fuel. In particular, the Government should lift the freeze on working-age benefits, which is currently due to last until April 2020, and end the five-week wait for universal credit. Leicester was one of the later places in the country to have the roll-out of universal credit. Ministers insisted that the lessons had been learned, but I can tell them that the evidence from my own eyes, from my own constituents and from our food banks is that those lessons have not been learned, and that families simply do not have the money or the savings to afford that five-week wait. If they lose their jobs or reduce their hours, they have to go on and off universal credit.

Thirdly, the Government must do much more to tackle the endemic low pay and insecure jobs that dominate too many sectors of our economy. I know they have just pledged to increase the living wage to over £10.50 an hour in five years' time, but my constituents cannot wait for five years, especially if there is a no-deal Brexit, to get a genuine living wage to make ends meet. So I ask the Minister this question: what more are the Government doing to tackle this issue?

Lastly, we need serious and sustained action to tackle the cost of living. In particular, we need a long-term strategy to tackle this country's housing crisis, with a massive programme to build more social and affordable housing, and to reform the private rented sector, the cost of which—as I have already said—is one of the major factors driving child poverty in Leicester today.

I realise that some of these issues are beyond the Minister's remit, but let me just say this to him: the Government are spending over £6 billion on preparing for a no-deal Brexit. Imagine the difference that £6 billion would make to the lives of the 12,000 children growing

up in poverty in my constituency. Imagine how their lives and the future of our country could be transformed if this money was spent on giving them the best start in life, and not on a damaging no-deal Brexit that the Government do not even have a mandate for. This is not a matter of necessity; it is a matter of political choice.

It is a disgrace that the Government are even contemplating a no-deal Brexit, which could make the poorest people in our country even poorer. They must change course—and now.

4.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon.

I thank the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) for securing this debate, and for her very passionate and compelling speech on this issue. I am conscious of the fact that we probably do not have enough time in this short debate to cover this important subject in the detail that both she and I would like, but I will stress that my door is always open and she is very welcome to come and see me to discuss this matter or any other matter at any other time—and that offer extends to all other hon. Members across the House. In the somewhat limited time available, I will do my best to answer as many of the points that have been raised as possible.

Tackling poverty will always be a priority for this Government. I have been in this role for just over five months, and my key priorities have been tackling poverty and the support we can give to vulnerable groups. I am pleased that poverty in the east midlands, whether on an absolute or relative basis, or before or after housing costs, is lower for all individuals and children than in 2010. However, the hon. Lady knows me well enough to know that I consider one child in poverty to be one child too many. I will continue to work with hon. Members on both sides of the House to identify and tackle the root causes of poverty and with counterparts in other Government Departments to ensure that our efforts to tackle poverty, particularly child poverty, are joined up.

Our ambitious welfare reforms are driven by a firm conviction that the benefit system must work with the tax system and the labour market, so it supports people into employment and higher pay. That is the only way to deliver a sustainable long-term solution to poverty. It is also the best way to give everyone the chance to succeed and share in the benefits of a strong economy.

Tackling poverty and disadvantage is not, however, something that the Government can do alone. The hon. Lady is passionate about the issue and I welcome the innovative partnership approach taken by Feeding Leicester. I understand that she was disappointed that the bid of Leicester City Council and Feeding Leicester to be part of the holiday activities and food programme this summer was not successful.

I am sure that the hon. Lady appreciates that we had a huge amount of interest in being part of the programme but have only a limited amount of money. Barnardo's, which works in the east midlands, put together a strong bid—the highest scoring in the region, and it covered Leicestershire county, as she pointed out. Although it did not specifically include the city of Leicester, it operated in some parts of her constituency.

We will continue to build our understanding of how free provision can be co-ordinated, which will provide valuable information about what support works for the sector. The hon. Lady's contribution is noted, however, and I will make sure that her words are shared with my counterpart in the Department for Education. I praise the excellent partnership work taking place between the Leicester JobCentre Pluses and Leicester City Council in support of care leavers in particular, which ensures that they move smoothly on to universal credit and supports them into work, including through bespoke civil service internships, which are truly excellent.

I try to get out of the Department as much as I can. In the most recent recess, I spent four days travelling around the midlands and the north-east. I visited several organisations that work in close partnership with our JobCentre Pluses. I am absolutely clear that I want to encourage more co-location and collaboration between our jobcentres, their staff and those organisations. Such coalitions of local organisations, including charities, community groups, local authorities, social enterprises and others, show us what can be achieved when we all come together to take joint action to help to eliminate hunger and its root causes in our communities.

The Government believe that tackling poverty requires a collaborative approach that goes beyond providing a financial safety net through the Department for Work and Pensions and addresses the root causes of poverty and disadvantage to improve long-term outcomes for children and families. That is why we have taken wider cross-Government action to support and make a lasting difference to the lives of the most vulnerable—people whose ability to work is frustrated by issues such as a disrupted education or a history of offending, mental ill-health or drug and alcohol abuse—who often face complex employment barriers. It is also why our jobcentre work coaches work with external partners to offer individualised specialist support to help some of the most vulnerable people in our society to turn their lives around.

The Government, and certainly I, take the issue of child poverty extremely seriously. The evidence shows that work is the best route out of poverty. There are 730,000 more children in working households compared with 2010. Not only are those children less likely to grow up in poverty, but they have significantly better life chances. The data is clear that a child living in a household where every adult is working is about five times less likely to be in relative poverty than a child in a household where nobody works. Children growing up in a workless family are almost twice as likely as children in working families to fail at all stages of their education.

The hon. Member for Leicester West mentioned Brexit. I am conscious of the fact that she is passionate about the issue and has spoken about it many times. The Government have been clear that leaving the EU with a deal is absolutely their preferred option. However, as a responsible Government, we continue to plan for a range of exit scenarios, including a no-deal. As part of the process, we continue to monitor the effects of EU exit on the economy. Rates and benefits continue to be reviewed in line with the relevant legislation for uprating. The Government have rightly put in place contingency plans for a range of exit scenarios. These contingencies ensure that the Department for Work and Pensions can continue to provide our vital services, and that individuals will continue to be able to access DWP benefits and services on the same basis as they do now.

[Will Quince]

The hon. Lady raised a number of other points—housing, food banks and universal credit in particular. I will touch on all of those, but I have to talk about this Government's employment record, which is vital to our success in helping people out of poverty. We are rightly proud of it. There are now over 3.7 million more people in work compared with 2010, and unemployment is at its lowest rate since the 1970s, having fallen by more than half since 2010.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of in-work poverty. It is important to point out that around three quarters of the growth in employment since 2010 has been in full-time work. As the evidence shows, that substantially reduces the risk of poverty. Full-time work in particular dramatically reduces the risk of being in poverty. There is only a 7% chance of a child being in relative poverty if both parents are working full time, compared with 66% for two-parent families with only part-time work. The absolute poverty rate of a child where both parents work full time is only 4% compared with 44% where one or more parent is in part-time work.

The hon. Lady mentioned universal credit. Universal credit supports full-time work through smooth incentives to increase hours and a general expectation that lone parents and partners should work if not caring for young children or a disabled person. It also offers generous childcare subsidies. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has also reported that universal credit is likely to help out of poverty an extra 300,000 members of working families, the majority of whom will include someone who works part time. Over three-quarters of the growth in employment since 2010 has been in full-time work.

The hon. Lady also rightly mentioned support for working families. We have taken a range of broader steps to help families keep more of what they earn, including the delivery of another rise in the national living wage to £8.21, an increase in a full-time worker's annual pay of over £2,750 since its introduction. This has delivered the fastest pay rise for the lowest earners in 20 years. The hon. Lady rightly referenced the recent speech made on 30 September by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, saying that the minimum wage would rise to £10.50 within five years.

That is not all. Tax changes have made basic rate taxpayers over £1,200 better off since April, compared with 2010. The most recent changes mean that a single person on the national minimum wage is now—from April—taking home over £13,700 after income tax and national insurance. That is £4,500 more than in 2009-10.

Considering universal credit more broadly, as rightly raised by the hon. Lady, we know that there is more to do to support working people. But we have already gone much further than previous Governments. In his statement, the Chancellor of the Exchequer set out our

ambition to “end low pay across the UK.” Universal credit is at the heart of our reforms. It works alongside other policies introduced by this Government to promote full-time employment as a way out of poverty towards financial independence. We know that universal credit is working. It is getting more people into work, and more people are staying in work. It supports those who need it while providing a springboard into work, with every extra hour worked being rewarded, and each claimant receiving tailor-made support from a work coach.

There are lots of areas that I did not manage to cover in detail, and I would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady to do so. She touched on food banks. I will, of course, raise the issue referenced by her in her speech in relation to food banks and Brexit with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

I will speak with the Trussell Trust, as I do regularly, and other food bank providers, to hear their thoughts on the issue.

On the point that the hon. Lady raised about universal credit and the five-week wait, I stress that, on day one, people are able to get a full advance payment of up to 100% of their indicative award. That is repayable over 12 months, interest-free. That is an important point.

The hon. Lady touched on housing, which is probably one of the biggest issues that we face as a country. We have an issue with providing enough low-cost, affordable homes for social rent. I am working very closely with my counterparts at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that housing for social rent, and in particular affordable housing, is firmly on its agenda. The Government have a firm commitment to delivering on house building, but when we look at our housing benefit bill and the number of people who are waiting for social housing we must not forget the importance of ensuring that we build sufficient social housing. Changes have been made that support the further building of social housing, but, yes, we absolutely need to do more.

In conclusion, I reaffirm our view that our long-term approach is the right one if we are to deliver lasting change and tackle poverty in all its forms. This Government believe that work provides economic independence, pride in having a job, and improved wellbeing. We want to empower people to move into work by giving them the opportunities that they need to make the most of their life, and to improve the life chances of their children. It is that belief, based on clear evidence about the value of work, that will drive us as we continue to reform our welfare system, so that it better supports working people, while continuing to support those most in need.

Question put and agreed to.

4.26 pm

Sitting suspended.

Adult Learning and Vocational Skills: Metropolitan Borough of Dudley

4.30 pm

Margot James (Stourbridge) (Ind): I beg to move,

That this House has considered adult learning and vocational skills training in the metropolitan borough of Dudley.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on assuming her new position at the Department for Education. I am delighted to see the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) in his place as this debate is about vocational provision and adult learning in the borough of Dudley. Although I will focus on the provision in Stourbridge, we must assess the need for provision in my constituency of Stourbridge in a borough-wide context.

This debate takes place in the context of the very sad closure of Stourbridge College earlier this summer. Our college dates back over 100 years to the establishment of the Stourbridge College of Art in 1848. That institution merged with the Stourbridge Technical School in 1958. I first visited the college in January 2007 and found a vibrant and welcoming culture. Shortly after that visit, I found myself volunteering as a young enterprise course facilitator at the college, helping students learn about business through the experience of setting up an actual company. I then joined the college board as a governor during 2008-9 and remained close to the college after I was elected and after I stepped down from the board in 2010.

The closure of our college came as a real blow to me, as it did to thousands of other people locally, many of whom had a direct connection with the college. Clearly, those worst affected were today's students, the teaching staff, the support staff and local small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly small retailers in the vicinity of the campus. When staff and students told me that the closure came as a terrible shock and something of a bereavement, they were not exaggerating. Although I do not want to dwell on the past and cover in too much depth the role played by Birmingham Metropolitan College, known as BMet, which acquired Stourbridge College shortly after 2010, there are a few points to make before I come to the main part of my talk, which is about the need for continued skills provision in my constituency and preferably on the site of the Hagley Road campus.

To cut a long story of mismanagement and financial woes short, by May of this year, BMet had outstanding debts to the banks of £8.9 million and to the Education and Skills Funding Agency of £7.5 million. Debts running out of control was not the only problem. The college had also received three "requires improvement" notices, but each time Ofsted rated the college a 3 and did not award it the worst rating of a 4, and that detail is very relevant to the bigger picture, as a rating of 4 would have triggered automatic intervention much earlier by the ESFA. The Department should learn from that crisis.

BMet now has a legal obligation to bring its debts down to a sustainable level, which of course means the sale of assets that has led directly to the closure of our college. Top of my list of current concerns, which I hope the Minister will take back to discuss with her

Secretary of State, is the nature of the sale of the Hagley Road site. The site has been associated with education for many years, and it is the deep wish of our community that the site be protected in future for educational use, at least for the most part, for the generations to come.

When I hear that BMet is expected to realise red book value for the site, alarm bells start to ring and I urge caution on that endeavour and objective. Some colleges within BMet have sought to balance their books by selling off land assets for housing development. We have had experience of that already in Stourbridge; long-suffering residents who live near the Longlands site, which until eight years ago was the proud home of the college's centre for the study of art and design, have endured years of antisocial behaviour and uncertainty as BMet has negotiated with a trail of developers and the local authority to effect the sale of the site. The ESFA should take note that it took from 2011 until the summer of this year to get planning approval for the residential development on that site.

The board of BMet and the ESFA should reflect hard on the fact that there would be huge opposition to selling the Hagley Road site for residential development and that it would take years to get the change of use and planning consent required. I know that educational providers are in serious talks with BMet about acquiring the site, and I hope those talks will reach a satisfactory conclusion.

That brings me to my main point: the need for vocational skills learning and, in particular, adult learning in Stourbridge. The first thing to acknowledge is that there has been a history of over-provision of 16-to-19 education in our borough of Dudley. Until the closure of Stourbridge College, we had four colleges in the borough, and the problem has been that the 16-to-19 population has been in decline from a high of 12,400 in 2009 to a low of 10,700 across the borough in the current year.

However, there are two points that must be borne in mind. First, if we take a 15-year horizon, 2019 is the low point. From this year, the numbers start to increase again to an estimated 11,800 by 2024. Secondly, it is harder to predict the numbers of adult learners. There were 280 adult learners registered at Stourbridge College in the year 2017-18, and it is that local provision for adult learning that concerns me most, primarily because so many people in adult learning have either part-time employment—sometimes full-time employment—or caring responsibilities, and travelling elsewhere in the borough can present a critical issue for them, such that it will deter them from the studies and upskilling that they acknowledge they need. As I say, it is harder to predict those numbers.

The importance of adult learning should be seen in both a social and an economic context. Indeed, the social and the economic are intertwined. When I was a Minister in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, I had responsibility for labour markets. It was a real eye-opener, and I got to see what lay behind the statistics. We now have close to full employment—a record that this Government can justly be proud of—but there are a great many people living with the assistance of tax credits on low-paid and insecure employment.

[Margot James]

I was proud to be associated with the Taylor review of employment practices, commissioned by the previous Prime Minister. The Government accepted the vast majority of Taylor's recommendations, which centred on improving the quality of work. The opportunity for people to improve their skills throughout their working lives was fundamental to achieving that goal, and nowhere is that improvement greater than among people who are stuck in low-skilled, low-paid employment.

The Government have presided over good and positive changes in the quality of vocational learning. The former Minister for Skills, my right hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Anne Milton), introduced much-improved apprenticeship standards and the Institute for Apprenticeships, which have been much to the good. However, the emphasis has been on 16 to 19-year-olds and not enough is being done for the huge need that exists for upskilling and lifelong learning among the working-age population.

The figures, I am afraid, speak for themselves: the expenditure on adult learning nationally has been reduced by approximately 40% since 2010. Skills devolved to our own region, the West Midlands Combined Authority. That has been well received, but I am informed that the adult education budget across the west midlands is £2.1 million, which would barely buy a bedroom in a luxury flat not a mile from here.

The funding reduction has been damaging both economically and socially. There are many groups in the working-age population who face greater barriers than most when it comes to securing employment at all and certainly better employment. I am talking about people who have been unemployed for a long time, people with poor literacy and numeracy skills, people who were brought up in the care system, people with disabilities, ex-offenders, sometimes even older workers, and parents who have had a career break. All these groups, and more besides, face significant barriers to improving their skills and getting back into the workplace so that they can progress their careers.

The social consequences of that are dire, but it is also bad news economically. I know the digital and technology sectors particularly well from my role as a Minister at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. The skills gap in those sectors will not be narrowed or eliminated just by improving the quality of technical and digital education among the school, university and college-age populations. We need to look at the working-age population as well. The 2018 Lloyds survey found that 21% of people in the working-age population lack basic digital skills, while 8% have zero digital skills and 5.4 million working adults do not have the full range of basic digital skills. Unless we sort this out, it will delay the uptake of technology in industry and dampen the growth of the tech sector, and we can only sort it out through a commitment to adult learning.

This issue also accounts for some regional discrepancies, especially when we look at the five basic skills that people of working age need in the digital space. Some 71% of people in the north-east have all five basic skills, whereas in the south-east the figure is 86%. The ramifications of the skills gap and the inadequate response to it by adult learning are a key issue that needs to be resolved. I am delighted that the Department for Education's

resources have been increased going forward. I congratulate the ministerial team on securing that increase and appeal to them to use some of that money to go some way towards redressing the reduction in funding for adult learning that I have described today.

When it comes to the provision of adult learning in particular and vocational skills generally, I believe there is an economic case for continuing with such provision in Stourbridge, and I am delighted by the reaction of local colleges: the exemplary Dudley College, now rated outstanding by Ofsted, Halesowen College, rated good by Ofsted, and the brilliant King Ed's—King Edward College—in my constituency. They are all committed to supporting the provision of vocational and adult learning on the Hagley Road site—assuming that it can be sold to an educational provider who welcomes that provision on a subletting basis.

There will need to be some new money, however. Dudley College and Halesowen College absorbed many students and staff from Stourbridge College at the beginning of this term. I commend both colleges for their amazing work on integrating our students and college staff into their new environment. Funding is tight for both colleges, and they will need new money in order to meet the needs of vocational skills provision and adult learners in my constituency. I have my eye on various budgets, including growth deal 3 funding from, I presume, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the underspend in the local enterprise partnership. Providers in the Black Country can also bid for funding from the almost £97 million skills budget. Local authority level budgets may also need reassessment, but my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North has been working on securing money from the stronger towns fund. Of course, the combined authority also has devolved funding for skills, and I am grateful to Mayor Andy Street for his close involvement in our bid to get adult educational provision and vocational skills in my constituency—ideally on the Stourbridge Hagley Road site.

I thank everybody involved locally thus far in the bid to secure the future of adult learning and skills provision in Stourbridge. I trust that this afternoon's debate and my upcoming meeting with the Secretary of State and local colleges towards the end of October will lead to some real movement on this issue, so that my constituents, whether adults or young people, will still be able to access the training needed by both Stourbridge and, importantly, our economy.

4.46 pm

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Ind): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. Before I begin, may I pay a big tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Margot James) and thank her for securing this important debate? She is a brilliant local MP and an asset to our borough and to her party. She has worked tirelessly to improve education for school pupils, young people and adults in Stourbridge, encouraging young people to aspire to study at top-level universities and supporting Stourbridge College, Old Swinford Hospital, King Edward VI College, and all the other local schools. It is therefore a great shame that, despite all her hard work and support for education

in Stourbridge, the college has found itself in this position, but I know that she is working hard to try to address the situation and ensure that educational provision continues on the Hagley Road site.

My hon. Friend was right that the number of 16 to 19-year-olds in Dudley and the Black Country is increasing and that low levels of skills both among people who are out of work and among the working-age population is a long-term issue—the legacy of a traditional industrial economy. However, it is important to note that Dudley is the biggest place in the country with no higher education provision, so further education plays an important role in filling that gap and ensuring that people can get degree-level qualifications through further education—apprenticeships in particular—so that those working in local businesses can get the skills they need.

I will talk mainly about what is happening in the north of the borough and in Dudley itself. When I was first elected in 2005, Dudley College was failing and struggling to attract staff and students, with unsatisfactory results and a decrepit set of old buildings spread around the town that it had inherited from various schools or the University of Wolverhampton. Thanks to the brilliant leadership of Lowell Williams, who is now the college's chief executive but who used to be the principal, and the new principal Neil Thomas, we now have officially the best college in the country—the first to be awarded outstanding status under the new Ofsted inspection regime. It has achieved record results, has more students than ever before, provides among the highest number of apprenticeships in the country, and has a brilliant, brand-new town centre campus. Right at the outset, therefore, I pay tribute to Lowell Williams and his team. They have done more than anybody else to transform opportunities for young people in Dudley, and to transform and regenerate the town centre. They have made a huge difference in Dudley. I was absolutely delighted when his work at the college and his contribution to further education in the wider west midlands were recognised last year by his being awarded *The Times Educational Supplement* further education leader of the year.

It is important to understand the context in which we are discussing education in the Black Country. Fifty years ago, Black Country manufacturing made the west midlands the UK's richest region. Output in the west midlands outstripped even that in London and the south-east. Then came the huge loss of manufacturing in the 1970s and '80s, and we faced a 40-year struggle to replace jobs lost in recessions or due to technological change or to competition from lower-wage economies abroad. As a result, output in the west midlands lagged behind that in the rest of the country for 35 years, during which we fell further behind. In the 1970s, manufacturing provided half the region's jobs; the figure today is nowhere near that number. Instead, a high proportion of jobs are in low-productivity and slow-growth industries. We have had a higher proportion of public sector jobs and a smaller proportion in business, financial services and high-tech industries.

There are lots of brilliant industries and there has been major investment at companies such as Jaguar Land Rover, but I think everybody would accept that we have struggled to attract new investment and new industries to replace the jobs we have lost. As a result, unemployment has been a stubborn problem. Long-term youth unemployment is still twice the national average.

It is the need to respond to those big economic changes that has driven the transformation of education in Dudley. Over the next 20 years, there will be huge growth and millions of well-paid jobs in high-tech industries such as advanced manufacturing and engineering, technical testing, low-carbon industries and construction, digital media, biotech, healthcare technologies and the rest. This is literally a new industrial revolution. At the same time, there will be far fewer jobs for people with limited skills or no qualifications at all, and many of what we think are regular jobs for life will disappear.

We believe that young people in Dudley are as good as anyone, that they deserve the same chances as young people elsewhere in the country, and that with the right support and the best facilities they can do just as well as anyone else. We also believe that we have to make education and skills our No. 1 priority, to attract new industries and well-paid jobs to replace those we have lost in traditional industries, to help local business grow, to give youngsters a first-class start, and to help adults get new jobs as well.

Driven by that vision and those beliefs, Dudley College has increased the number of 16 to 19-year-olds in education by almost 2,000 learners—from 3,000 in 2008, to 4,900 by 2019. It has become one of the largest providers of apprenticeships nationally, increasing the number of apprentices from 600 in 2008, to an amazing 3,853 by 2015. These are high-quality apprenticeships, with 51% of all apprentices in programmes related to science, technology, engineering and maths, and 44% of all full-time learners in STEM-related subjects. Despite cuts to the adult education budget, the college maintained its adult provision, supporting more than 3,000 learners a year to retrain.

The college has invested—this is amazing—£60 million in a new campus, which has transformed the town centre. We now have a new academic sixth-form centre, a new building for creative arts and service industries, centres for advanced manufacturing, engineering and advanced building technologies, new specialist facilities for students with special needs, and a construction apprenticeship training centre. Almost all of those have been developed without any Government support, by selling off old land and buildings and, while maintaining a strong financial position, by borrowing resources from the banks.

I would like the Minister to come to Dudley to have a look at all that, because I think she will be amazed when she sees it. Everybody thinks, "Oh, I'm just going to go to another FE college," but that is not the case in Dudley. Lots of FE colleges say that they do manufacturing and construction, but they do not do it like we do it. It is absolutely amazing. The phenomenal advanced manufacturing and engineering centre is working with hundreds of local employers.

Although the Black Country has a higher proportion of SMEs and manufacturing than anywhere else in western Europe, those small businesses cannot afford research centres. If a business is worried about how it will meet the payroll a week on Friday, it will not be able to develop links with universities, or think about big apprenticeship programmes, or new products and processes. That is the gap that Dudley College of Technology is filling. It is an amazing centre of advanced manufacturing. The state-of-the-art, high-tech construction centre is doing ground-breaking work on digital construction,

[Ian Austin]

using artificial intelligence, drone technology, and working on how to design and manufacture buildings in factories instead of on site—extraordinary work. It is the only college of its kind in the country to be doing that sort of work, and that facility was developed in partnership with leading construction companies in the country.

We are now moving to the development of new university-level technical skills and an apprenticeship centre, which will provide even higher level qualifications in Dudley. As I have said, Dudley is the biggest place in the country with no university campus, although we did successfully secure funding to open one of the country's 12 institutes of technology. Last month, the Government announced that we will get £25 million from the stronger towns fund, which will be spent on the next phase of that campus, University Centre Dudley. That will transform an old rail terminal just outside the town centre. It has been an old rail terminal and a derelict site for as long as I have been alive, but it will finally be transformed. It will be developed by Dudley colleges, Dudley College of Technology, universities and local businesses, and they will train young people for jobs in new, growing and high-tech industries such as advanced manufacturing, digital technologies, low-carbon industries, autonomous electric vehicles, and health care.

The money from the Institute of Technology and the stronger towns fund is the best news that Dudley could have had. I have been saying for 14 years that we must make education and skills Dudley's No.1 priority, and at the election I promised to campaign for that new high-tech skills centre. I am delighted that our campaign has paid off, and it is exactly what we need to give Dudley a bright future and make it a stronger town again.

The college has also established the Dudley Academies Trust, which is sponsoring four schools in Dudley. It has only been going for a year, but it is already possible to see improvements in aspiration, discipline, standards and results. The Minister will not be surprised to hear that all secondary schools in Dudley are finding that funding for special educational needs is inadequate to meet people's needs, and all schools are under pressure in Dudley, as they are across the country—it is important to note that point in a debate such as this.

Ladder for the Black Country is an extraordinary local project, and over the past five years, thousands of people across the region have landed jobs or improved skills thanks to that scheme. It brings businesses and training providers together to take on young people and invest in their future. Young people gain the hands-on work experience that they need to start their careers, and businesses get a highly trained, well-motivated workforce, helping to breach the skills gap that many firms say holds them back. In recent years, thousands of people have landed jobs thanks to that scheme. It was launched in 2014, and was so successful in the Black Country that it was expanded to Staffordshire and Shropshire, and copied by communities across the country. It is backed by local authorities, businesses and training providers, and I pay particular tribute to the driving force behind it, Kevin Davis, chief executive of the Vine Trust Group, and to the *Express & Star*, whose support has been critical to the scheme's success.

What Kevin Davis, together with Martin Wright, editor of the *Express & Star*, and his predecessors and colleagues have achieved is remarkable, and their work will make a huge difference to the lives and prospects of thousands of local people. We should imagine how much better off Britain would be if every local paper and the voluntary sector worked together to do that sort of important work in every community. It is a great example of how, over the past 15 years, we have brought together schools, colleges, local universities, local authorities, employers, training providers, the region's media and the community as a whole to make educational skills our No. 1 priority so that we can attract new investment, new industries and well-paid jobs to replace the ones that we have lost in the Black Country, help local businesses to grow, give youngsters a first-class start and help adults to get new jobs, too.

5 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, and to have heard two very upbeat speeches, which come out of what has obviously been a very traumatic situation in Stourbridge.

I welcome the Minister to her place—I say “her place”, but we are still in some confusion about what the final settlement in the Department will be. We know that the Secretary of State has taken overall responsibility, but that does not really address adequately the need for a full-time day-to-day representative. The Minister has gallantly stepped into the breach as the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch) is on maternity leave, but we remain concerned about how further education will be covered permanently in the Department in future, especially day to day.

I give great credit to the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Margot James) for summing and taking us through the problems that there have been, but also for looking to the future. She is absolutely right to talk about the critical issue of adult learners. When policy makers and Ministers of whatever hue looked at further education colleges in the past, they sometimes saw them in silos: 14 to 18, 18 to 24, and post-25. Governments often forget, as I am afraid this Government have done on several occasions, that introducing policies that affect one sector—I am thinking particularly of the advanced learner loans' failure to be taken up in any significant or meaningful quantity; about half of them go back to the Treasury unused every year—can affect the overall competence and ability of colleges to deliver. One of the strengths of the FE sector is the ability to put on courses that cut across the generations, and across other things too. That is a real issue.

The hon. Lady rightly said that adult learners are down 40% since 2010 and that skills gaps and digital gaps remain, despite her work as a Minister and that of others. Those things will be critical in the 2020s. She is also right to mention underspending local enterprise partnerships; when I was shadow Minister for regional growth, it was extraordinary to see the uneven way in which LEPs engaged with their local communities. It sounds as though the hon. Lady's area has a plethora of overlapping organisations; one can only hope that the funding she would like to see will come out of that.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), who was equally upbeat; given the statistics he cited, he was right to be. I am pleased to hear his apprenticeship figures, although sadly they are not reflected in many places across the country. He is absolutely right to praise Dudley College of Technology and to say how critical it is to engage with SMEs. The Government need to address the issues in the west midlands and the Black Country; as the hon. Gentleman rightly says, the region has an enviable tradition of producing highly skilled people, but nevertheless people are being left behind without traineeships and so on. Those things are an important part of what we need to do.

The hon. Member for Stourbridge took us through a little of Stourbridge College's history, and I have been able to read about it in the excellent columns of the *Express & Star*, which the hon. Member for Dudley North mentioned, and in *FE Week*. I do not want to go through that blow by blow, but it is encouraging that the other local colleges have come to the fore, wanting to take students on board. Having looked at the history of what happened, I think the hon. Member for Stourbridge was right to be critical of the position in relation to the BMet takeover. It is important to pay tribute to all the people who lifted their heads above the parapet and kept the issue alive, including councillors of different persuasions, with whom I know the hon. Lady has engaged. There was a major protest against the closure of the college, at the end of June, which attracted hundreds of people to the streets, and that shows what pride there is in the historical position and what concern there is about what will happen in the future.

The hon. Lady is right, and in different circumstances I too have campaigned when councils and others have thought that a closed site should just be developed for housing. It is clear from what she says that that is not a good use for the site, and it is my understanding that interest has been shown by potential training providers. That should not be dismissed because, of course, seven out of 10 of the apprenticeships that are still delivered in this country come from training providers. They are a critical part of the local economy. All those things are of particular importance.

The hon. Lady has asked the National Audit Office to look closely at the situation at BMet. That has resonance not only in relation to BMet, but in relation to how we look at the stability of further education and whether we have got things right in terms of the early warning. It would be useful if the Minister shed further light on one of the things that have become a problem in this area—which, indeed, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), whom I shadowed as Skills Minister for several years, has always pointed out: the importance for FE students of adequate travel and financial capability.

I have two or three questions for the Minister, although it is with some diffidence that I put them to her, as she is new in her post, and was not in it when the legislation was introduced. I want to ask her about the implications of what has happened at Stourbridge in the context of the Technical and Further Education Act 2017, which I took through Parliament with the then Skills Minister, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), in 2016-17. It established the principle of having an education adviser in circumstances where colleges were closed or sold off. We know what the trigger was in the present

case—the report of the Further Education Commissioner. I should like to know whether the case is technically an insolvency or a sell-off. Those are critical issues with respect to the Act.

Does the Minister know how many of the students were SEND students? I know that special educational needs and disabilities are among her day-to-day occupations in her role. Do we know how many of those affected were doing apprenticeships? Are there any other vulnerable groups, in any number? The hon. Member for Stourbridge gave an admirable list of the various different types of people who have been affected by the transfer process and who have not yet been accommodated as they should have been. In Committee in December 2016, we moved amendments to the Bill to the effect that in the event of potential closures there should be full consultation with bodies representing FE staff and students. The Minister at the time said that such occasions, when colleges became insolvent or were disposed of, would be relatively rare, but sadly that has not been the case.

I will quote what the University and College Union has said in its briefing note for this debate about what has happened in Dudley. It made some of the points that the hon. Lady has made about BMet, but it also said that it had been

“extremely concerned at the lack of meaningful consultation with staff, students and the local community about the decision to close Stourbridge College.”

It goes on to say it was

“essentially presented as a fait accompli... with no real chance to look at alternative options”.

Significantly, UCU has also carried out a survey about the issues around travel to Dudley or Halesowen. Some students—quite a number—said that that travel could make their studies more problematic; some said it would require them to take two buses; and several staff members raised concerns about the suitability of facilities at Dudley and Halesowen to deliver the required scale of provision following the transfer of Stourbridge students. I have no detailed knowledge of what is happening on the ground in these areas, but those issues should be looked at.

More broadly, UCU is—I think this is a fair point—critical of the experience of Stourbridge, seeing it as

“symptomatic of a more widespread failure by the FE Commissioner to engage effectively with staff and students”

who have been affected by his recommendations.

In my view, UCU is absolutely right to say that, because it shows up some of the inadequacies in the 2017 Act. Of course, the FE commissioner can only work to the remit that the Government and the Education and Skills Funding Agency give him, but this illustrates how flawed and disconnected that system for colleges can become. It has become far too casual about how it engages with people in the colleges, and apprenticeships have not been engaged with in any meaningful way.

Failures such as Stourbridge are not isolated. In May 2018, *The Times Educational Supplement* said that there were inadequacies and that one college in eight was in poor financial health. In recent weeks, the columns of *FE Week* have been littered with accounts of problems at other colleges. At Brooklands College, ESFA ignored a whistleblower nearly two years earlier; it is planned that a flagship national college will dissolve, despite Department for Education bailouts; and indeed, Lord Agnew himself has been brought in as an enforcer.

[Gordon Marsden]

I am afraid that those things are not signals of a healthy eco-sphere in this area, and the Government fail—they have failed, despite yesterday's announcements by the Secretary of State about new technology colleges—to understand that axing grants and offering loans has been a disaster. There is no strategy from the Government for the staffing crisis, with retirement depletions. Again, I am talking nationally, but since 2010 24,000 teachers have left FE. In real terms, pay has fallen by 25%.

These issues are really serious and there is not much point in promising more shiny buildings if there is no money on the ground to effect the sort of major transformations in the 2020s that the hon. Members for Dudley North and for Stourbridge talked about regarding training. Continuing professional development, decent salaries and decent conditions are things that we in our party have considered—across the silos—in our new lifelong learning commission, in the promises that we made in our 2017 manifesto about properly funding and nurturing the FE sector, and in our commitment to a green new deal.

Stourbridge College was not failing, but it was still put into this situation. It had those buildings, which the hon. Lady is so keen to preserve in another capacity, but that did not save it from being shut down. And before the Government get too cock-a-hoop about the promises of new shiny buildings, I urge them to look at some of the issues regarding the staff, the teachers and the students of the 2020s.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): In welcoming the Minister to her new post, I remind her to try to leave one or two minutes for the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Margot James) to wind up.

5.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Michelle Donelan): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, and I welcome the comments from other hon. Members who have welcomed me to my post.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Margot James) on securing this debate. I know that she worked closely with my predecessors on this issue. I am delighted to have the opportunity to discuss it further today, especially given that we share a passion for further education and recognise the importance of adult education.

The closure of the Stourbridge campus is regrettable. I do not want to underestimate the impact that it has had across the community and the ripples that we have seen. As the hon. Member for Stourbridge noted, the site has been used for more than 150 years and is seen as part of the fabric of the community. We have heard a great deal about the closure of the campus, which is within Birmingham Metropolitan College's provision. I assure her that we take the closure seriously, but it is important to keep in mind the fact that colleges are incorporated bodies and thus independent. Of course, the Government have a duty to protect the interests of the students and will do everything in their power to do so, but decisions about how an individual college is structured and how it operates remain the responsibility of the college's corporation.

We have, however, been working closely with Birmingham Metropolitan College to ensure its sustainability and protect the interests of learners, who must always come first. Despite our efforts and assistance, the college has been in financial difficulty for some time and subject to intervention by the Further Education Commissioner since August 2015. It received a Government loan and emergency funding, but problems persisted.

Between December 2018 and April 2019, we conducted a structure and prospects appraisal of the college to assess the options. A range of options was considered but removing provision at Stourbridge was the best option to support the college's financial sustainability and, crucially, to ensure that good-quality provision was available for current and future students. Students getting the best learning experience is the most important thing.

Affected students have been a topic in today's debate. I reassure hon. Members that they have been relocated to Dudley College of Technology and Halesowen College, where they will benefit from high-quality learning experiences delivered by providers with better Ofsted ratings and will therefore have better chances of better outcomes. As I said, I do not underestimate the problems that the closure has caused the community, but I stress that, in the long term, it should leave the college in a stronger financial position and, crucially, enable learners to receive the high-quality technical education that they deserve.

There have been calls, in particular from the hon. Member for Stourbridge, for an inquiry into the financial problems of BMet College. The Further Education Commissioner is planning to undertake a capacity and capability review to assess its progress under the new leadership team. Furthermore, Dame Mary Ney will carry out an independent review of how the Government monitor college finances and financial management. The review will also look at their effectiveness in practice, including the work of the Education and Skills Funding Agency and the Further Education Commissioner's team. It will recommend changes that will reduce the risk of such problems recurring.

I want to put it on record that I have listened to the proposal mentioned by the hon. Member for Stourbridge for the site to continue as an educational facility with some adult education. Although I do not have jurisdiction over that option, I encourage all local stakeholders to review and explore it. It is a matter for BMet, however, and its governors will need to demonstrate that they secure the best value from the sale of the asset to satisfy their legal responsibilities as trustees.

The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) noted the issue of travel for students. I reassure him that no student will be travelling more than 10 km. In addition, in Dudley, there is a free west midlands travel pass, and Halesowen provides a coach that goes through Stourbridge. We are making our best efforts to ensure that those problems are minimised.

On the hon. Gentleman's question about the number of students with special education needs and disabilities, I do not have those figures to hand, but I will certainly write to him. I will also write to him about those doing apprenticeship schemes. Throughout the process, all stakeholders have worked together to minimise the disruption to current students as a priority.

As Members will know, the West Midlands Combined Authority is now responsible for certain adult education functions and is funded by the adult education budget. It receives the second-largest share of devolved AEB funding, worth a total of £125.6 million for the academic year 2019 to 2020. It has provided funding for Stourbridge and Dudley residents, transferring funding to Dudley College and Halesowen College. I hope that that alleviates some of the concerns referenced by the hon. Member for Stourbridge.

I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who has been working tirelessly with the authority and the borough council to provide assurances on the continuity of provision. As I mentioned, students have been relocated to other providers, and I want to touch on what the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) said about the excellent Dudley College. It is one of the largest apprenticeship providers in the west midlands, with a total income of over £10 million between 2018 and 2019. Some 90% of the adult learners from Stourbridge go to Dudley College. It has a broad curriculum offer and hundreds of full-time and part-time courses. It specialises in engineering, manufacturing and modern construction technologies—perfect for local industry. It is also at the forefront of our plans for T-levels, being a pilot provider.

Dudley really is an area of focus and investment. As noted by the hon. Members for Dudley North and for Stourbridge, it will be home to the Black Country and Marches institute of technology, one of the first 12 IOTs announced by the Government earlier this year. Those will deliver high-quality, high-level education across the country, backed by £170 million of Government funding. That has been led by Dudley College, working in conjunction with the University of Wolverhampton and key employers, which is testament to the joined-up thinking across the borough. Dudley College is clearly leading the way in delivering and equipping people with the technical skills that employers need now and will need in the future.

I must also highlight the fact that Halesowen College has a strong reputation for standards and is ranked in the top 10% of colleges for examination performance. It offers a wide range of provision for young people and adults, and it has been selected to deliver the new T-levels, but from 2021. Two thirds of students aged 16 to 19 from Stourbridge have gone to Halesowen. It offers a broad choice, as well as quality, which must always be the focus.

It would be apt for me to touch on the wider importance of adult education. The Government are committed to ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to access the education and training they need, whatever their circumstances, background and age. Investment in skills is a priority, and we want to ensure there is high-quality provision that will lead to high-quality outcomes and better employment opportunities for all.

As noted by the hon. Member for Dudley North, we have an ageing population. People are working longer. There are also advances in technology and artificial intelligence—something touched on by the hon. Member for Stourbridge. That all means that the need for high-quality adult education that can upskill and reskill our population is increasing ever more. We therefore need to ensure not only that our young people leave school equipped with the skills that employers and industry need, but that adults can improve their skills and learn

new skills. Our adult skills system needs to improve productivity, employment and social inclusion. It supports people who are starting out on their career, but also those who are continuing on that journey.

That is all paid for by the adult education budget that I have referenced, and is in addition to high-quality apprenticeship schemes. It is easy to associate apprenticeship schemes with those who are young, but 41.4% of starts between 2017 and 2018 were for those aged 25 and over. For many, an apprenticeship opens up a new world of work and learning, and it builds their confidence and helps them to progress.

I will briefly touch on the launch of the national retraining scheme, which will help prepare adults for changes to the economy, including those brought about by automation, and help them to retrain for better jobs. It will focus on adults aged 24 and over, without a degree qualification, who are earning low to medium wages, as they have less access to existing support and so will be most in need of the ability to retrain. We are initially investing £100 million, and the first part of the service, “Get help to retrain”, has been launched in three areas, including the west midlands. The region really is helping to shape the scheme. Dudley College of Technology—yet again—was involved in the recently completed pilot of the flexible learning fund.

As was noted by the hon. Member for Dudley North, who is a big advocate of the fact, Dudley is one of the first 100 towns to secure funding under the towns fund—it is important to flag that up—and we expect there to be a strong skills component to that. I hope that all local stakeholders will make sure that these issues are a key theme in discussions on how to spend the money that is granted.

I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate. The closure of the Stourbridge campus will continue to cast a shadow over the area, but as I have stressed, there is so much to be positive about in our local area—a point echoed by the hon. Members for Dudley North and for Stourbridge. I would be delighted to accept the invitation to Dudley; I will arrange that as soon as possible. To recap, the area will boast one of the first IOTs, and one of the first T-level providers. It has excellent, wide-ranging provision in highly performing colleges that deliver high-quality outcomes for students. There is also the towns fund and the work of the West Midlands Combined Authority. These, taken together with our policies on skills and technical education, paint an extremely positive picture and will ensure that people of all ages in Dudley can get the education, training and skills that they deserve.

5.26 pm

Margot James: I must thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) for his extremely kind remarks about my work. They are fully reciprocated; I have seen at first hand what an incredible champion he is for his constituents and the wider borough of Dudley. I echo his praise for Dudley College. I, too, have seen its progress over the past 10 years; it has been truly transformational. I join in his tribute to the former principal, Lowell Williams. The Minister made the good point that Halesowen College is in the top 10% of colleges for results; it is a great asset to the wider borough.

[Margot James]

My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North gave the very important context, which is that we need local improvement in skills to attract new industries, which will bring better-paid employment. That is central to the industrial strategy, in which I am a great believer; it is crucial for our borough.

The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) showed great understanding of our local situation—I must thank him for that—and deep experience of further and adult education. He mentioned the survey done by locally by Stourbridge College staff and students, which revealed the issues to do with travel locally. The Minister says that there is a safeguard: no student should have to travel more than 10 km. However, that is a huge distance in our borough. As I mentioned, we should not underestimate the difficulty of travel, particularly for adult learners, but also for younger students who have particular needs.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned my dialogue with the National Audit Office. I was pleased to hear the Minister talk about the various inquiries that the Department has set up. I welcome Dame Mary Ney's inquiry; I look forward to seeing the fruits of that. I thank the Minister for her support. She encouraged local stakeholders in Dudley borough to look for and find a solution to ensuring very local provision, particularly of adult learning. I welcome those remarks and thank her for setting out the funding opportunities at the combined authority level. I am meeting Mayor Andy Street to discuss those opportunities next week.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered adult learning and vocational skills training in the metropolitan borough of Dudley.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 1 October 2019

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Environment and Animal Welfare

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Theresa Villiers): Today I am notifying the House about recent announcements I have made on measures to enhance the welfare and protection of animals. These include proposals to address long journeys for live animals that are being transported for slaughter, and to restrict the import and export of hunting trophies.

First, I have announced that we will consult on improving animal welfare in the transport of live animals. Last year DEFRA issued a call for evidence in relation to future standards on welfare in transport, followed by commissioning external research, and inviting the farm animal welfare committee to conduct a review and make recommendations.

I welcome the farm animal welfare committee's recommendations that live animal journeys should be minimised and that animals for slaughter should not be transported longer distances if suitable alternatives are available. FAWC's report will inform a public consultation on this issue, which will be published in due course. The consultation is intended to take forward our manifesto commitment on restricting the live export of animals for slaughter.

Secondly, I recognise the concerns that have been expressed regarding the welfare of primates kept as pets, given the complex needs of these animals. Therefore, we will issue a call for evidence to better understand:

- the scale of ownership of primates as pets,
- how they are acquired, and
- the merits and impacts of potential restrictions on ownership, sale, breeding and trade.

The call for evidence will be published in due course.

Thirdly, we will issue a call for evidence on compulsory microchipping for pet cats. Evidence will be sought on the benefits and impacts of subjecting cats to similar measures to those currently required under the rules on compulsory dog microchipping. The call for evidence will be published in due course.

Fourthly, we will launch a consultation on banning the import and export of trophies from the hunting of endangered species. This follows the introduction of the UK's world-leading ivory ban in December 2018. A roundtable on trophy hunting was held in May 2019, with all sides of this debate represented. The views raised during those discussions will inform the proposed consultation on further restrictions on the import and export of hunting trophies. The consultation will be published in due course.

Alongside these measures, I have announced plans to create a new forest project in Northumberland to help improve our natural environment and respond to climate change.

Trees and forests need to play a vital part in our response to climate change. To start an ambitious new Northumberland forest, the Government have announced their commitment to create three new forests in the county, with up to 1 million trees to be planted in the period up to 2024.

We expect planting to begin next year to coincide with the COP26 conference. The Government will set up a new forestry partnership for Northumberland to help identify sites for afforestation and provide a forum to bring local stakeholders together to help take the project forward.

We expect these plans to pave the way for further woodland creation partnerships elsewhere in the country.

[HCWS1838]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Luke Hall): Today's publication by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) on homelessness deaths in England and Wales in 2018 makes for sobering reading. The Government will continue to take strong action to address this vitally important issue.

This important report from ONS draws attention to the tragic deaths of those who are homeless. A 22% increase in deaths of homeless people from last year is simply unacceptable. One death on our streets is one too many. This is an issue we all find deeply concerning and this Government are working tirelessly to stop these needless deaths for good.

That is why we are investing £1.2 billion to tackle homelessness and have bold plans, backed by £100 million, to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and end it by 2027. This funding was further bolstered as part of the recent spending round announcements. This Government have committed a further £422 million in 2020/21 to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. This marks a £54 million increase in funding from the previous year. I look forward to detailing precisely how we will allocate this funding in due course.

Much of this funding is already having an impact: the rough sleeping initiative (RSI)—a cornerstone of our ambitious rough sleeping strategy—has provided £76 million to 246 councils across the country to date. Councils are using this funding to support rough sleepers off the streets and into secure accommodation where they can get the help and the support they need. The RSI impact evaluation published last month, shows that the RSI has reduced the number of vulnerable people sleeping rough by 32%, compared to the number it would have been had the initiative not been in place. As a result, hundreds more people are in warm, safe housing tonight.

However, there is much more to be done; especially as the cold weather period is a particularly difficult time. That is why, in periods of severe weather, severe weather emergency provision (SWEP) is triggered. Local authorities

work closely with charities to provide basic emergency accommodation during these weather conditions to minimise the risk of harm to individuals who are sleeping rough when the temperature drops.

To supplement this, the Government launched an additional £10 million cold weather fund last month. The fund will enable us to build on the successes of last year's fund by increasing outreach work further and extending winter shelter provision.

The Government will continue to work tirelessly to ensure that we are providing advice and support so that people can escape the streets and get the comprehensive support they need to stay off the streets. That is why we introduced the landmark Homelessness Reduction Act and published a rough sleeping strategy last year. These efforts will put in place the structures that will prevent and relieve homelessness in all its forms.

I know that many people who sleep rough have significant health and care needs, including substance misuse needs. Indeed, as both data sets from this year and the previous year have shown, substance misuse is the leading cause of deaths amongst people who sleep rough.

That is why MHCLG is working closely with the Department for Health and Social Care, NHS England and Public Health England to further support these vulnerable individuals. This includes steps such as:

- Securing £30 million funding from NHS England over the next five years to meet the needs of rough sleepers by providing better access to specialist homelessness NHS mental health support, integrated with existing outreach services;
- a rapid audit of health service provision to rough sleepers, including mental health and substance misuse treatment;
- launching a £2 million fund through Public Health England to test community-based models of access to health services for rough sleepers, including mental health and substance misuse services;
- working with safeguarding adult boards to ensure that safeguarding adult reviews are conducted when a person who sleeps rough dies or is seriously harmed as a result of abuse or neglect, whether known or suspected, and there is a concern that partner agencies could have worked more effectively to protect the adult. Lessons learned from these reviews will inform improvements in local systems and services;
- and new training for frontline workers to help them support rough sleepers under the influence of new psychoactive substances such as spice.

The NHS long-term plan sets out new funded action the NHS will take to strengthen its contribution to prevention and health inequalities; this includes action that will improve outcomes for people experiencing rough sleeping, for example through specialist mental health services.

The recently published prevention Green Paper "Advancing our health: prevention in the 2020s", recognises that: people experiencing rough sleeping, and those at risk, experience poorer health outcomes than the wider population, that living in a safe and secure home is a protective factor in good mental health, and that drug misuse and dependency is associated with a range of harms including homelessness. The Government will set out their plans to tackle these issues following the close of consultation in October 2019.

One death on our streets is one too many. I hope that what has been set out provides assurances of our commitment to tackling rough sleeping and protecting some of the most vulnerable people in society.

[HCWS1839]

House Building and Planning

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): Building new homes is not just about bricks and mortar, it is about ensuring everyone, including developers, does their bit, to make swift progress, protect the environment, and give the next generation well designed, environmentally friendly houses that they can be proud to call home.

That is why, today, I have announced the publication of new guidance, including the "National Design Guide", to drive up the quality of new homes. I have set out more detail on this guidance in the statement I also made today titled "National Design Guide". "The National Design Guide" can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-design-guide>

The Government have also launched a consultation on stronger building regulations that will pave the way for the future homes standard. These 2020 changes aim to improve the environment by cutting carbon emissions in new homes by almost a third, while keeping household bills low. The Future Homes Standard consultation can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/the-future-homes-standard-changes-to-part-l-and-part-f-of-the-building-regulations-for-new-dwellings>

Using new technologies such as air source heat pumps and the latest generation of solar panels, developers will need to ensure they are doing their bit to tackle the threat of climate change.

Views are being sought on how changes to building regulations can drive down the carbon footprint of homes built after 2025, including changes to the ventilation and efficiency requirements, as well as the role of councils in getting the best energy standards from developers. The consultation will run until January 2020.

The Government will consult on a new accelerated planning Green Paper that will provide the blueprint to overhaul the planning system to create a simpler, fairer system that works for everyone—from home owners to small and medium businesses, local communities to larger housing developers—ensuring councils work at pace to decide proposals.

Local residents will no longer have to contend with a complicated and outdated planning system, but a more user-friendly approach designed to simplify the process. Small developers will similarly benefit from the simplification of guidance, with the introduction of a new tiered planning system.

Application fees will also be reviewed to ensure council planning departments are properly resourced, providing more qualified planners to process applications for new homes and other proposals, but if councils fail to meet their targets then sanctions could be applied, including the potential for consumers' fees to be refunded.

The Government have also set out its ambition to reduce planning conditions by a third, and will take forward proposals to allow homes to be built above existing properties as well as seeking views on demolishing old commercial buildings for new housing, revitalising high streets in the process.

The accelerated planning Green Paper will be published in the autumn.

[HCWS1841]

National Design Guide

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): This Government have been clear that we must build the homes that this country needs. However, this objective must not come at the expense of quality. The places we create must be ones that communities can be proud of, both now and in the future. Places that look beautiful, work well and provide environments in which people and communities can thrive.

Too many homes currently being built do not meet this test. They are not well-proportioned, fail to reflect the character of their local area and form part of neighbourhoods which are equally poorly designed, both in terms of their street layouts and their lack of landscaping and street trees.

I am committed to addressing this problem and driving up the quality of new homes. It was for this reason, that this Government set up the building better, building beautiful commission to champion beautiful buildings. The commission has been tasked with making recommendations to the Government on how to promote and increase the use of high-quality design for new build homes and neighbourhoods. We have also hosted two national design quality conferences, bringing together industry leaders and Ministers to discuss how they can work together to ensure new developments across the country are well designed.

Today I can announce that we are going further and publishing new guidance, including the National Design Guide. This illustrated guide sets out the 10 characteristics of beautiful and well-designed places. This provides a clear picture for home builders of what is required of them to build homes of sufficient quality.

The National Design Guide is also capable of being a material consideration in planning applications and appeals, meaning that, where relevant, local planning authorities should take it into account when taking decisions. This should help give local authorities the confidence to refuse developments that are poorly designed.

The illustrated National Design Guide emphasises the importance of responding positively to context, creating locally distinctive character, building strong communities, responding to future issues such as climate change and ensuring places sustain their quality. Alongside it, we have published new guidance on the processes and tools that can be used to achieve good design, and how to engage communities to ensure that developments reflect local views.

To provide further clarity on the principles of good design, we will produce a national model design code in the new year which will set out recommended parameters for key elements of successful design. This will follow the building better, building beautiful commission's final report due to be published in December and consider their recommendations.

The Government understand that quality design does not look the same across different areas of the country, for instance, that by definition local vernacular differs. The national model design code will therefore set a baseline standard of quality and practice across England. Local planning authorities will then be expected to take

this into account when developing their own local design codes and guides and when determining planning applications.

The national planning policy framework makes it clear that authorities are expected to use design codes and guides to provide as much certainty as possible about what is likely to be acceptable in each area.

These design codes and guides should be developed as early as possible in the process, alongside the preparation of local policies, including neighbourhood plans, so that they are able to have the greatest impact on design. In the absence of local design guidance, local planning authorities will be expected to defer to the illustrated national design guide and national model design code.

We will consult on the content of the national model design code, including the factors to be considered when determining whether facades of buildings are of sufficiently high quality, how landscaping should be approached, including the importance of streets being tree-lined wherever possible, that new developments should utilise a pattern of clear front and backs, and that developments should clearly take account of local vernacular, architecture and materials.

All local authorities have a responsibility to ensure that the design of homes and places in their area is of a sufficiently high quality. This includes combined authorities and the need for elected mayors to consider design quality and beauty in relation to growth and placemaking. Looking to the future, I intend to consider what more can be done to ensure that quality and beauty are fully embraced in the vision and requirements that apply in each area.

The publication of this design guidance is an important milestone in securing a step-change in the quality of design. By working together with a shared understanding of the homes we want to build and live in, we can create beautiful places where communities can thrive, with homes they can be proud of.

The National Design Guide can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-design-guide>

[HCWS1840]

JUSTICE

Alcohol Abstinence Monitoring Requirements

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): As part of the urgent review of the sentencing and release framework announced by the Prime Minister in August, we considered changes to sentencing for the most prolific offenders which could help break the cycle of re-offending. We know that these offenders generally have multiple and complex needs which are linked to their offending behaviour, in particular drugs, alcohol and mental health needs. If we are to break the cycle of re-offending, particularly for prolific offenders who cause significant public concern and harm to society, solutions will often lie in community sentences.

In order to address offending linked with alcohol misuse, I propose to introduce alcohol abstinence and monitoring requirements (AAMR) across England and Wales, starting in 2020, requiring offenders not to drink for up to 120 days. It follows successful pilots launched both in London by the Prime Minister in his former role

as Mayor of London, and in the Humberside, Lincolnshire and North Yorkshire community rehabilitation company (CRC) area.

This will form part of a wider package of reforms for community penalties which we are planning to bring forward that offer an appropriate level of punishment, while tackling the underlying drivers of offending through treatment. As we continue to develop policy and before legislation is laid, we will consider fully the impact of the proposals and have due regard to the requirements of Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010.

[HCWS1843]

Sentencing and Release Framework

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): Our current sentencing and release framework is failing to give victims and the wider public the confidence they should have in our criminal justice system. Too often, we are told, the time offenders spend in prison does not match the severity of the crime. The Prime Minister therefore announced an urgent internal review, focusing on the sentencing for the most serious violent and sexual offenders and the rules governing when and how those offenders are released. The review also considered changes to sentencing for the most prolific offenders which could help break the cycle of re-offending.

Based on the findings of the review, we will be bringing forward proposals shortly for a comprehensive package of legislative reform. This will include amending the automatic release point for the most serious sexual and violent offenders.

Under the current system, which dates back to the Labour Government in 2003, the majority of offenders receive a standard determinate sentence and must be released automatically at the half-way point, to serve the second half of their sentence in the community on licence. We want to stop this practice for the most serious violent and sexual offenders, who have committed offences such as rape, robbery and GBH with intent, so that they spend much longer in prison, protecting the public and giving greater confidence to victims. We shall therefore legislate to amend the automatic release point for the most serious sexual and violent offenders—where the offence carries a maximum life sentence—from the half-way point to two thirds of the sentence.

As part of our package of reforms, we also plan to bring forward proposals for community penalties that offer an appropriate level of punishment, while tackling the underlying drivers of offending.

Our proposals to reform the sentencing and release framework complement the raft of initiatives we are taking as a Government to fight crime and protect the public from its devastating consequences. As we continue to develop policy and before legislating, we will consider fully the impact of the proposals and have due regard to the requirements of s149 of the Equality Act 2010.

[HCWS1842]

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 1 October 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
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