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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 10 March 2020

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Public Health Grant

1. **Mick Whitley** (Birkenhead) (Lab): When he plans to publish the local authority public health grant allocations. [901416]

8. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): When he plans to publish the local authority public health grant allocations. [901424]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): The 2019 spending round announced real-terms growth in the public health grant for next year, so local authorities can continue to invest in prevention. Every local authority will see a real-terms increase in their grant allocations, which I expect to publish imminently.

Mick Whitley: Despite the urgency of the coronavirus situation at the moment, we could see local councils planning to cut numbers of nurses, even though they would be very much needed, simply because the councils do not know what their public health budgets are. Does the Minister think that is acceptable?

Matt Hancock: No, and that is why I have just announced that every local authority will see a real-terms increase in their grant allocation so that that does not have to happen.

Vicky Foxcroft: Between 2017 and 2020, the Government have cut nearly £4 million from Lewisham Council's public health grant, and the public health team is facing many challenges, not least from coronavirus. What does the Secretary of State mean by "imminently"? Councils need certainty. Given the pressure that local teams are under, will he look to restore funding to 2010 levels, in line with population growth and inflation?

Matt Hancock: As I say, every local authority will see real-terms increases in their allocation, and by imminently I mean in the next couple of days.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): The Secretary of State keeps saying that local authorities do not need to worry about any of this, as the Government have said that they will be giving local authorities more money. Well, I asked my local authority on Friday whether that reassured it, and, surprise, surprise, it did not. That is because "more" can mean anything. Is it a penny more? Is it a pound more? Is it £100 more? Is it £1 million more? There is a bit of a difference. When will he let them know? He has now said that "imminently" means in a couple of days' time. Exactly what is he waiting for? Is it the Budget?

Matt Hancock: As I say, the good news is that local authorities can all plan, with confidence, on the basis that these budgets are going up in real terms, and the exact details will be set out imminently.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Traditionally, public health was about infectious diseases and sanitation. More recently, it has become about lifestyle issues. Given the epidemics of the 21st century, particularly covid-19, what measures will the Secretary of State be taking, in allocating the public health grant, to refocus on infectious diseases, both current and those that are likely to come?

Matt Hancock: That is an incredibly important question—one that we will be addressing in the run-up to the spending review. The truth is that the public health grant is but one small part of the overall effort of local authorities to improve the health of the residents they serve. Although it is an important part, and it is good that it is going up in real terms for every local authority, we have clearly got to ensure that the whole effort of a local authority is there to improve public health.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): All the evidence suggests that coronavirus is of greatest risk to those who are older in our population. The average age in my constituency is 10 years above the national average, yet in public health allocations Cumbria gets only £36 per head, as opposed to the national average of £63 per head and £100 per head for many parts of London. Does the Secretary of State agree that that is a dangerous inequality? Will he fix it in the upcoming statement?

Matt Hancock: The inequalities in health outcomes are what I am particularly concerned about, especially the length of healthy life expectancy, which is of course affected by both communicable and non-communicable diseases, the public health around both of those important considerations and the wider issues that my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) just mentioned. We will take all of that into account as we look at how the public health grant is best allocated and best used, ahead of the spending review.

GP Appointments

2. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce waiting times for GP appointments. [901417]

5. **Edward Timpson** (Eddisbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase the availability of appointments in GP surgeries. [901420]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): We are creating an extra 50 million appointments a year in primary care, and we are growing the workforce by some 6,000 more GPs and 26,000 other clinical staff on the frontline. We are encouraging everyone to “Think Pharmacy First”, so that access to the right healthcare professional is there when people need it.

Sir Desmond Swayne: When will patients notice the difference?

Jo Churchill: Shortly—I thank my right hon. Friend for that. First, I should like just to whip over the statistics. In December, there were nearly 400 more nurses, 200 more doctors and 1,000 more other staff providing patient care in primary care than there were a year earlier. By encouraging recruitment and retention, and minimising unnecessary bureaucracy, we will help primary care to support the patients in the most appropriate way and ensure that everyone has faster access to appointments sooner. If you would indulge me for a second, Mr Speaker, I would like to thank all those in primary care and across the NHS, who are working harder than ever to provide support to patients as our response to coronavirus ramps up. Everyone has a part to play in getting through the next few weeks and months. We are rightly proud of how our NHS has and will continue to support anyone affected, but we need also to support them.

Edward Timpson: At a time when the Government are rightly committed to increasing GP provision, my constituents and I are deeply concerned that Sandiway surgery in the north of Eddisbury has been earmarked for closure by its practice group. What can my hon. Friend, or Cheshire clinical commissioning group, do to help the practice to improve its overall standard so that it can continue to treat its 3,700 patients for many years to come?

Jo Churchill: The closure of any GP practice stirs up understandably strong emotions in the local community. The Care Quality Commission inspection last May highlighted safety concerns at Sandiway surgery, and significant investment is required to bring the premises up to standard. I believe Danebridge medical centre has consulted on and looked into the difficult decision to close the practice and increase appointments and services at the other two local practices. As ever, I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss how we can ensure that Sandiway residents have access.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I note what the Minister said about GPs and their role in responding to covid-19, and I entirely agree with her. GPs want to do their very best for their patients. They need quicker access to protective equipment and they need clear guidance. Will the Minister lift all the bureaucracy that GPs currently face? I am talking about appraisals and the quality and outcomes framework end-of-year requirements. Will she suspend those requirements so that GPs can focus entirely on responding to coronavirus?

Jo Churchill: I am currently having discussions to make sure that, within the bounds of making sure that patients stay safe, we can lift all bureaucracy where appropriate. We now have more than two thirds of personal protective equipment rolled out into GP surgeries, with the rest arriving imminently.

Jonathan Ashworth: Many of our constituents, especially those with underlying conditions—from emphysema to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, diabetes and asthma—will look to GPs for guidance. When they see what is happening today in Italy, they will be extremely frightened. What is the Government’s advice to those with underlying conditions? Will the Minister tell the House, for the benefit of our constituents, what lessons the Government have learned from the Italians about their handling of coronavirus to date, and why we are taking a different approach?

Jo Churchill: As we have laid out from the beginning, our approach will be science-led and about the safety of everybody. That is why at some point in future doctors will make decisions and clinical judgments, and those with existing co-morbidities or at the more serious end of an illness will be triaged up into an appointment first. That may mean that some people have to wait a little longer during this period, but it will always be done on clinical advice and with the safety of the patient at the heart of things.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Last year, 85% of doctors surveyed by British Medical Association Scotland said that the pension taxation crisis would have a significant effect on NHS services, such as through waiting times. The Government’s proposal to raise the taper threshold to £150,000 does not fully solve the problem and would cost the Treasury more than it would to reverse the policy, so what is the Minister doing to address the issue?

Jo Churchill: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will understand that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor might be a little upset if I started to make announcements from the Dispatch Box today. It is a work in progress. It has been a little trickier with general practice than it is in the health service, because GPs do not do specific shifts, making it a little trickier to organise.

Martyn Day: Scotland’s Cabinet Secretary for Health, Jeane Freeman, wrote to the Chancellor last month to call for a sustainable resolution on this matter in the Budget. Ahead of tomorrow’s Budget, what assurance can the Minister offer that the joint Department of Health and Social Care and Treasury review of the impact of pension taxation on the NHS will produce a long-term solution that will work for all doctors?

Jo Churchill: I gently refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer that I gave a few moments ago.

16. [901432] **Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con):** All the advice given by the Department of Health and Social Care is to self-isolate and not to go to see our GP, but if someone does need to see a medical professional, can they use any of the current digital technology in the NHS to provide them with the advice that they need?

Jo Churchill: Yes, they most definitely can. Many surgeries are making sure that “Digital First” is becoming part of their everyday offer to patients across the land. We have a real chance to ensure that we both protect the health of the nation and embrace digital technology to improve access to GPs still further.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): For years, GP numbers in Sunderland have been falling at a much steeper rate than in the rest of the country.

Since 2015, we have lost 29 permanent family doctors. Given the major health inequality issues that we already face, when will the Minister get to grips with the worsening situation that we face in Sunderland?

Jo Churchill: We are committed to providing those extra 6,000 GPs across the country. We have also made sure that incentive schemes are in place in areas where it is difficult to recruit, and they have been found to be very effective in driving additional GP numbers into challenging areas such as the hon. Lady's constituency. We are working on the matter.

Antimicrobial Resistance

3. **Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the risks to public health of antimicrobial resistance. [901418]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): The UK is a world leader in tackling the global challenge of antimicrobial resistance. Since 2014, we have invested £615 million in the area, over half of which is in research and development, as part of our vision to contain and control AMR by 2040.

Mr Davis: Regrettably, the coronavirus outbreak has demonstrated the susceptibility of global society to pandemics and antimicrobial resistant organisms. Lord O'Neill, who chaired the review, estimated that some 10 million people a year could die by 2050 because of AMR. The previous chief medical officer said that we could easily get to a state where fully half of people die from untreatable infectious diseases. Is my right hon. Friend content with the level of work and research being done in his own Department with respect to novel approaches such as genomics, combination drugs and new sorts of vaccinations? Will the importance of those things be reflected in the forthcoming spending review?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the threat of AMR, because microbial illness and disease is just as much of a threat as viral disease and we must ensure that we retain the tools that we currently have through antibiotics to tackle it. We are investing in that space with more to come.

New Hospital Projects

4. **Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): What progress he has made on new hospital projects. [901419]

22. **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What steps he is taking to build new hospitals. [901439]

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): We have announced £2.7 billion of funding for six new hospital schemes under HIP1—the first tranche of the health infrastructure plan; and £100 million of seed funding for a further 21 schemes covering 34 hospitals under HIP2, ready to go to the next stage. That is 40 new hospitals in total.

Robert Halfon: I am hugely grateful to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for granting Harlow the capital funding for a brand new hospital. Does the Minister agree that our new hospital will transform the patient

experience for Harlow residents and the working environment for our brilliant NHS staff, and deliver state-of-the-art healthcare for our town and surrounding villages?

Edward Argar: I agree entirely. I am looking forward to visiting it with my right hon. Friend soon.

Elliot Colburn: It is thanks to this Government that we have £500 million of investment in the Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust, not only to improve existing hospitals but to build a third new one as well. Does the Minister agree that this is excellent news for local patients and will he encourage my constituents and those in surrounding areas to get involved in the consultation on where the new hospital is to go?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is indeed excellent news. As he will be aware, the public consultation process is under way. It would be wrong for me to prejudge that, but I encourage everyone to participate.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that it is important to spend taxpayers' money well, and that to spend it on a site that is going to cost 20% more than St Helier—away from the people with the greatest health needs—is not the best way to spend public money?

Edward Argar: I gently say that I am not going to prejudge the outcome of the consultation, in which I am sure that the hon. Lady would encourage others to participate. Regardless of the outcome, I am sure that she would want to welcome the £500 million investment from the Government that will benefit her community and others.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): During the election campaign, the Prime Minister promised 40 new hospitals, but the Government have only pledged funding for six: £2.7 billion. After more than five years of raiding capital budgets, when will the Government provide the £6.5 billion that is required to fix the maintenance backlog alone?

Edward Argar: As I have made clear, we have set out the funding for the six new hospitals in the first tranche; we have invested seed funding in the development of the schemes for the further 34; and further capital announcements will be made in due course.

NHS Workers: Immigrants

6. **Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What steps he is taking with the Home Secretary to fast-track immigration applications from doctors and nurses who want to work in the NHS. [901422]

9. **Simon Jupp** (East Devon) (Con): What steps he is taking with the Home Secretary to fast-track immigration applications from doctors and nurses who want to work in the NHS. [901425]

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): This Government will be introducing an NHS visa, which will offer reduced fees and fast-track access for overseas doctors, nurses and allied health professionals to work in the UK. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will be outlining detailed plans in due course.

Andrew Bowie: Scotland has an increasing crisis of GP shortages, and in NHS Grampian—where £1 million had to be spent on agency nurses this winter—we have an increasing nursing crisis. Some people are understandably concerned that the changes to immigration rules will have an adverse effect. Can my hon. Friend confirm that the new NHS visa will be applicable in Scotland as well?

Helen Whately: Yes, I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. The NHS visa will be available for doctors, nurses and allied health professionals coming to work in the NHS across the whole United Kingdom.

Simon Jupp: As we all know, nurses, midwives, paramedics and physiotherapists are highly skilled roles, and the Government have been clear that they meet the immigration skills threshold. What steps is the Department taking to dispel the level of fake news on the subject, and to encourage the brightest and best from around the world to apply for these important roles?

Helen Whately: The salary thresholds for people coming to work in the NHS in the roles that my hon. Friend mentioned are linked to NHS pay bands, and applicants will have more than enough points to apply under the new immigration system. We are working with NHS employers to encourage international applicants. I thank my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity once again to dispel any myths in this area.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The Minister will have to try a bit harder, because the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy is certainly very concerned that its positions are not going to be covered. Others, such as care assistants, are also below the salary threshold. We are talking about vital roles. There are 100,000 vacancies across the NHS, so will the Minister go back to the Home Office and ask staff to look at the detail of these proposals so that they do not make the NHS staffing crisis any worse than it already is?

Helen Whately: The NHS visa is in place. There are also plans in place to ensure that we have international recruitment alongside investment in a home-grown workforce, and that we increase retention rates and the number of returners to provide the NHS with the staff it needs.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Many skilled health professionals in this country who have been granted refugee status are finding it difficult to get accreditation from the regulating bodies. May I commend to the Minister the healthcare overseas professionals programme of Sandwell and West Birmingham NHS Trust, and invite her to visit that trust? Will she have discussions with the regulating bodies to try to speed up the process for these people, who have the skills and want to work, and whom we need?

Helen Whately: Work has already been done by the regulating bodies. For instance, we are already speeding up the process for nurses from overseas who want to come here to work in the NHS. I would be very happy to have further correspondence with the right hon. Member about the specific problem, and would be delighted if he could send me an invitation to make the visit that he mentioned.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): I congratulate the Department on securing the NHS visa but, as the Minister knows, it does not apply to nurses and care workers in the social care sector. What is the Department's assessment of the gap there will be in the social care workforce as a result of this new immigration policy, and how are discussions going with the Home Office and No. 10 on that issue?

Helen Whately: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. I am well aware of concerns in the social care sector, particularly in areas where there are higher vacancy rates. It is important that employers make sure that they are taking the steps they can take to make sure that social care jobs are attractive and, of course, well paid, as they should be. I recognise as well a role for Government in this, supporting the role of working in social care, and overall making sure that we come together and fix the social care crisis.

Care for Young Carers

7. **Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** What recent estimate he has made of the number of GP practices that have adopted the care for young carers package. [901423]

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): NHS England outlined the care for young carers offer in GP surgeries in June 2019. The offer includes a package of practical plans and actions to help young carers. Uptake will be monitored at a regional level in England through integrated care systems.

Jim Shannon: I am grateful for the Minister's response. However, can she further break down the number of surgeries that have offered priority appointments for carers for home visits and additional mental health checks, and double appointments for the carer and those they provide for? What is she doing to see this rolled out in every GP surgery throughout the nation, bearing in mind that 40% of carers struggle with their own mental health?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend makes a really important point about support for carers and young carers. I cannot answer on the details of his question right now, but I will take it away, talk to the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), who is responsible for primary care, and the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), who is responsible for mental health, and come up with a better answer for him.

NHS Medicines

10. **Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to increase the range of medicines available to patients on the NHS. [901426]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): The systems that we have in place are already securing access to effective new medicines for many thousands of NHS patients—for instance, cystic fibrosis patients through the drug Orkambi. Our commitment to getting new drugs into the NHS through an innovative medicines fund will further expand the access to medicines for NHS patients.

Julian Sturdy: My right hon. Friend is aware that two children in my constituency have families who are self-funding the cannabis drug Bedrolite, which is their only means of controlling their severe epilepsy. He has very kindly agreed to meet me to discuss their case, but what action is being taken to make Bedrolite available on the NHS for families such as the two in my constituency for whom this really is the last resort?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue, and I look forward to meeting him later this month to discuss it. These are desperately difficult cases. We have to trust doctors to make the right clinical decisions for each individual patient. Two licensed cannabis-based medicines have recently been made available for prescribing on the NHS. We keep working hard with the health system, and with industry and researchers, to improve the evidence base. Also, the costs need to be brought down by industry. Last week, the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), held a roundtable with leading industry figures. I look forward to continued work to make sure that we can get these drugs to the people who need them.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Women suffering from endometriosis often do not get the medicine or treatment they need. One in 10 women suffer from this condition and it takes, on average, seven years to have a diagnosis. Will the Secretary of State please meet me and the all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis to discuss how we can develop research into this condition, and look at the work being done at Hull University?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I am very happy to look at that research and for either me or the Minister to meet the hon. Member and those whom she represents through the APPG. This is of course a very important issue. I think that it has been under-discussed for too long and should be brought up the agenda.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): Peterborough is the UK's fourth fastest growing city, home to over 200,000 people, and our hospital serves many, many more. Despite this, Peterborough and fenland patients are forced to travel to Cambridge, or further, for percutaneous coronary intervention and other cardiac medicines to treat or prevent heart attacks. Will my right hon. Friend support my ambition, and that of the trust, to ensure that there will be an elective PCI and other medicines cardiac service at Peterborough City Hospital?

Matt Hancock: I am very happy to look into that individual case and to meet my hon. Friend, or for the Minister to meet him, to see what we can do.

Points-based Immigration

11. Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the proposed points-based immigration system on the provision of health and social care. [901427]

23. Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the proposed points-based immigration system on the provision of health and social care. [901440]

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): The points-based immigration system is designed so that the UK can attract the brightest and best individuals to work here. As the hon. Member no doubt knows, jobs where there is a recognised shortage of supply, such as nurses, are on the shortage occupation list, and people filling those roles will score more than enough points to come to the UK. We are also introducing the NHS visa to make it easier for doctors, nurses and health professionals from all around the world to come to work here.

Brendan O'Hara: The sector is understandably worried about what a points-based system will mean for their ability to recruit the workforce they need. Soon I plan to reintroduce my private Member's Bill, which sought an independent review of the impact of Brexit on the sector, but will also now include an independent evaluation of having such a points-based system. Given the importance of an evidence-based approach to policy making, will the Minister agree to meet me and others to see how we can all work together to ensure that the long-term needs of the health and social care sector are met based on the evidence available?

Helen Whately: I thank the hon. Member for his question. I am in contact with stakeholders, as a relatively new Minister in this post, reaching out as much as I can. I am mindful of concerns about vacancy levels but absolutely committed to making sure that, across health and social care, we have the workforce we need.

Owen Thompson: Not only do this Government treat the Scottish Government with contempt, but they treat their own Scottish Tory colleagues in the same way, as they were reportedly livid about the points-based immigration system introduced. Given the implications for health and social care staffing in Scotland, will the Minister ask Cabinet colleagues to reconsider our proposals for a Scottish visa?

Helen Whately: We have the NHS visa, which applies to the whole United Kingdom. The Migration Advisory Committee has been clear that UK immigration policy must benefit the whole UK, and Scotland benefits from its own shortage occupation list, which will continue to exist.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that a German-style system of social insurance for adult social care would relieve the burden and reduce the requirement for overseas workers, by allowing a loved one, a neighbour or a friend to provide that care and be properly remunerated for it?

Helen Whately: I am well aware that my hon. Friend is very keen on that particular approach. He has hopefully received a letter from the Secretary of State, inviting colleagues to come to talk to us about the proposals and options for fixing our social care crisis, and I hope he will take that up.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): Will the Minister consider waiving the NHS surcharge for overseas staff who want to come to work in our NHS?

Helen Whately: I am well aware of concerns about the surcharge. Many overseas nurses coming to work in the NHS do not have to pay the surcharge, as it is covered by their employer.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The phrase “brightest and best”, when it appears in immigration talk, is obviously subjective and deliberately vague. What the private sector and local authorities want to know is: under the new Government system, will they be able to get people to come in who want to provide care—people we are desperate for?

Helen Whately: For the NHS, we have the NHS visa and a clear route to come to work in the health sector. For social care, there is a job to be done by employers, to make sure that working in social care is an attractive job that is well paid. I also recognise that there is a role for Government and for all of us in Parliament, to come together and support changes to how we fund social care. We need to fix the social care system for the future.

Low-risk Medicines

12. **Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to increase the range of healthcare professionals permitted to administer low-risk medicines. [901428]

18. **Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to increase the range of healthcare professionals permitted to administer low-risk medicines. [901434]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): We are currently considering all options to increase the range of healthcare professionals permitted to administer low-risk medicines. This is all part of making sure that our NHS workforce is as flexible as possible, and we will do that in the light of what can be done, while of course keeping a highlight on patient safety.

Dr Mullan: My constituent Jessica Warr works as an operating department practitioner in Leighton Hospital. She and her colleagues make a huge contribution to patient care. Would the Secretary of State agree to meet Jessica and other ODPs to hear their case for why allowing them to prescribe would allow them to enhance the care they provide for patients even further?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course, I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend and those he represents to make sure that we can get the right balance—the maximum possible flexibility, subject of course to patient safety.

Jo Gideon: Would my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the Government’s commitment to an extra 26,000 primary care staff and confirm that this will improve access to primary care services for my constituents in Stoke-on-Trent Central?

Matt Hancock: Yes, the 26,000 extra staff, as well as the extra GPs in primary care, are going to improve the position, but we also taking steps to improve access by making sure that people can access primary care in the best possible way. I can be clear to the House today that we will take a digital first approach to accessing primary care and out-patient appointments, so that, wherever clinically and practically possible, people can access—and should access—primary care through phones and digital means. This is especially important in the current coronavirus outbreak. Already, a roll-out has started, but we will make this across the country with immediate effect.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): We have been waiting for a year for the Greenwich clinical commissioning group to reopen a nurse-led practitioner drop-in centre on the Horn Park estate. This was a place where people from that local community could pop in and get minor treatments, but also vaccinations, and it could prescribe low-risk drugs. May I commend this service to the Secretary of State? Could he assist me in urging Greenwich CCG to reopen it as quickly as possible, but also look at it as a possible model for other areas?

Matt Hancock: Yes.

Ovarian Cancer

13. **Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to improve early diagnosis of ovarian cancer. [901429]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): Last year, 1.5 million more people with suspected cancer were seen by a specialist compared with the numbers in 2010, thanks to our dedicated workforce. We want to go further and diagnose three quarters of all cancers early—more if possible. I am grateful to those charities, particularly ovarian cancer charities, that are raising awareness this particular month. For cancers like ovarian, where symptoms are vague and can be harder to detect, it is more difficult. To achieve the ambition, we are radically overhauling screening to improve access to uptake and investing £200 million in diagnostic equipment.

Abena Oppong-Asare: What is the Minister doing to ensure that all women who are referred on this are diagnosed with ovarian cancer or ruled out within 28 days, in line with the faster diagnosis standard?

Jo Churchill: Under the long-term plan, we are rolling out the rapid diagnostic centres, giving GPs another important route to patients. With the Mike Richards screening review, we are making sure that we get patients to the clinicians—where they need to go—so they can access treatment faster. It is more important than anything else that we get the cancer early, so we can treat it well and give people a real chance of a long life.

Brain Tumour Research

14. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to support research into brain tumours. [901430]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): As I say, cancer survival is our priority and that was made clear in the long-term plan. Unlike many cancers, we have not moved the dial really far enough for patients with brain cancer. To ensure better outcomes for those affected by brain tumour, we need to focus and redouble our efforts on innovative research and new methods of diagnosis and treatment. That is why we have pledged £40 million over five years to stimulate brain tumour research, working alongside the Tessa Jowell brain cancer charity.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): That is welcome news. Ten per cent. of all cancer deaths of people under 50 are from brain tumours, but the cancer receives only 2% of the money spent on cancer research funding. The previous Government established an inquiry into this to see what more could be done. Does the Minister agree that this month, which is Brain Tumour Awareness Month, would be a good time to re-establish that inquiry?

Jo Churchill: I would be more than happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman to talk about his ambitions. The funding is going up and, as I have said before, it is always welcome to me when cancer charities drive awareness, so that people are more aware of the symptoms, particularly of cancers where we are not moving forward fast enough.

MMR Vaccine

15. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to promote take-up of the MMR vaccine. [901431]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): I strongly urge all parents to ensure that they vaccinate their children. Public Health England and the NHS are implementing actions from the measles and rubella UK elimination strategy, designed to increase the take-up of the MMR vaccination in children, adolescents and adults. That includes providing additional opportunities to catch up on missed vaccines and improving information to the public that emphasises the importance of getting the MMR vaccination.

Mr Sheerman: I hear what the Minister says and of course all our thoughts are on coronavirus at the moment, but is she aware that last year 143,000 people, mainly children and young people, died from measles and that the measles epidemic is going to come here as the rate of protection from the MMR vaccine decreases? This is a real issue. Will she join my campaign to make sure that every child who goes into pre-school care and early school has a certificate saying they have had the MMR vaccine?

Jo Churchill: I would love to meet the hon. Gentleman to talk about his campaign because the Government are looking at any way we can improve vaccination rates. Vaccinations work on protecting the herd and losing the

World Health Organisation status on measles last year was very sad. That is something that we should all be mindful of. We should make sure that we all look to help people to access MMR vaccines for their children.

Cromer Hospital

17. **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve health facilities at Cromer Hospital. [901433]

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): My hon. Friend is a strong advocate for Cromer hospital. It is relatively new, but the area's 2015 cancer strategy projected a 200% increase in the need for cancer care over the next 10 years. So last year we saw the start of the £4.15 million proposal for a new cancer centre at Cromer, in partnership with Macmillan. However, I know he and his trust a more ambitious than that.

Duncan Baker: I thank the Minister for that answer. North Norfolk is one of the oldest constituencies by demographics. It is very rural and a very long way from the Norfolk and Norwich hospital. What I am looking for is an enhanced urgent treatment centre with mental health facilities. That would really help my constituency and, not only that, it would take pressure off the Norfolk and Norwich hospital. Will the Minister support my campaign for more improvements there please?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is right to highlight that his constituency has the highest average age in this country. As an assiduous reader of the *Eastern Daily Press* I recently saw the story outlining the trust's plans for a UTC. I look forward to seeing those proposals develop further. The key to delivering them, or their making progress, will be partnership. I look forward to the hospital trust, my hon. Friend and the CCG working in partnership to deliver an outcome.

Life Expectancy

19. **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in life expectancy. [901436]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Life expectancy at birth is the highest it has ever been. Figures this week showed that last year mortality was the lowest since 2001, but we are not complacent. Already we have made clear our bold commitment to level up left-behind areas.

Cat Smith: The truth is that if you live in poverty you will get ill quicker and die sooner. For my constituents in Pharos ward in Fleetwood, life expectancy is 10 years shorter than just five miles down the road in Carleton, and following the report that came out last week we know that life expectancy has stalled and for the poorest women it is now declining. What kind of damning verdict does the Secretary of State think that is on his Government's 10 years of Tory cuts and austerity?

Matt Hancock: I agree with most of what the hon. Member said and the starting point in particular—that the gaps in healthy life expectancy are far too big. She will have heard me articulate from this Dispatch Box

how important it is that we close those gaps. The news out this week of lower mortality in 2019 was good news that she ought to welcome, but it certainly does not mean that the campaign to close the gap in healthy life expectancy is over. There is far more to come.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Coronavirus has a bearing on life expectancy and I have a particular concern in relation to GPs in surgeries in my constituency. A world-leader on the transmission of infections raised with me a vital question, which is the provision of protective suits and training. At the moment, I am told that they are not being given to GPs, but exclusively to hospital staff. Will the Secretary of State please look into that and do something about it?

Matt Hancock: I am right across this issue. My hon. Friend is right to raise it, but I can reassure him fully that we have now rolled out personal protective equipment to two thirds of primary care and the rest of it is in progress. We will absolutely address this issue. It is quite right that we did. We wanted to get the timing of the roll-out right so that the equipment is there should the epidemic hit in a very large way. We have to make sure we protect our health staff.

A&E Waiting Times

20. **Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to reduce the number of patients who wait longer than four hours for treatment in A&E. [901437]

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): Despite the NHS seeing a substantial rise in demand, with 1 million more attendances at A&E in 2019 than in 2018, our amazing NHS staff continue to work hard to ensure that everyone gets the care they need, including seeing 1.7 million more people within the four-hour standard than in 2010.

Sam Tarry: This morning, as I scanned the NHS England winter situation report covering Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust in my constituency, I saw that it had massively underperformed in terms of ambulance handover delays. Across this winter, it averaged 38% of handovers taking at least 30 minutes. The national average was just 14%. How do the Government explain the fact that, despite trusts seeing 16,000 fewer arrivals this winter, there were 22,000 more handover delays?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman will know that the London ambulance service serves the whole of London. His trust does see increased demand and increased challenges associated with winter, but I would also point out the positive. His trust received £1.2 million of winter capital in 2018 to aid preparations for winter. He will also know that the 20 hospital upgrades programme includes the St George's site, serving the trust more broadly with a health and wellbeing centre, which will ease pressures.

Topical Questions

T1. [901442] **Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): The global coronavirus outbreak is clearly growing. Last night, Italy placed the whole country in quarantine. We have updated our travel advice to advise against all but essential travel to Italy. All those returning from any area of Italy must self-isolate for 14 days. That is in addition to our advice that anyone who visited the specific areas of northern Italy that were originally locked down in the past two weeks should self-isolate for 14 days. We will do everything we can to keep people safe, based on the very best scientific advice.

Amy Callaghan: A recent survey by the Teenage Cancer Trust found that 29% of young people who were treated for cancer did not have a discussion about their fertility with a healthcare professional. Of those who did, 44% were not satisfied with that discussion. Will the Secretary of State meet me and representatives of Teenage Cancer Trust to work towards some much needed progress in assuring young people and their families that fertility is of extreme importance?

Matt Hancock: I know that the hon. Lady has personal experience in this area. I entirely understand the concern she raises. The personal plans that are being brought out from next year should help to address this problem, but the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), is very happy to meet her to make sure we get this exactly right.

T2. [901443] **Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con):** Over three and a half years ago, Grantham Hospital was closed overnight owing to temporary measures. This has gone on for far too long. Enough is enough. Can the Secretary of State help me and offer any guidance or update on what we can do to get those doors back open 24 hours a day?

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): It is vital that the people of Grantham are able to access 24-hour care for both accident and emergency and urgent treatment needs. I urge my hon. Friend to continue to work with his local health services and commissioners to develop plans to ensure the needs of his constituents are met. I know he has already been a strong advocate on this matter in this House for his constituents since his election, but I am of course very happy to visit him in Grantham if that would be helpful to him.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Personal protective equipment can be as important in social care settings as it is in hospital or GP settings, but care staff report having to buy their own gloves and one care provider had their order of protective equipment requisitioned by the NHS. The Secretary of State says that he is all over this issue, so what plans does he have to ensure that care staff have access to protective equipment to protect them and the people they care for?

Matt Hancock: Of course care staff too are absolutely vital in the national effort to address coronavirus, not least because of the increased risk to many people who are in residential settings and who receive domiciliary care. The work to make sure that protective equipment is available extends to social care staff. Of course, most social care is provided through private businesses, and the delivery model is therefore different, but that does

not make it any less important. I am very happy for the hon. Lady and the Minister for Care to have a meeting to make sure that we can listen to the concerns that she has heard about, because we want to address them.

Barbara Keeley: There are already 120,000 vacancies in the care workforce and we now face the prospect of large numbers of care staff having to self-isolate because of coronavirus. With the NHS also needing staff, as we have discussed already, what plans does the Secretary of State have to ensure that care providers are still able to fulfil their contracts and provide their clients with support?

Matt Hancock: This is also an incredibly important issue that we are considering and working on. We will make sure that we address any barriers to social care operating. In all contingency plans on the reasonable worst-case scenario, plans are needed for being able to operate with a 20% reduction in workforce, but making sure that the best care can be provided in what is going to be a difficult time for social care is a really important part of the effort that we are making.

T5. [901447] **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): When he announced the medicines and medical devices safety review of, among other things, vaginal mesh implants, the then Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), described the response to these tragedies as “not good enough”. Will the Secretary of State assure me that women who now need mesh removal are receiving all the support that they need and that adequate resources are in place for the treatments that they require?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is quite right to raise this—it is true that the NHS has had to rise to address the scandal over mesh. There is a lot of work still to be done.

T3. [901444] **Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Secretary of State is absolutely right to say that we need to take advantage of all the medical evidence. In the light of that, is it not deeply damaging for the Prime Minister to go on morning television and start musing on the idea that we might have a theory of letting coronavirus have its bounce out and see how it goes? Does that not absolutely fly in the face of the efforts that the Secretary of State is making? Can he clarify that that is not the policy of this Government and tell us what the hell the Prime Minister was talking about?

Matt Hancock: No, the hon. Gentleman is wrong to raise this issue in this way. It was addressed in the House yesterday actually—the Prime Minister was explaining that that is not Government policy.

T7. [901450] **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): Loneliness will affect most of us during our lifetime. It can define our lives and have a significant impact on our health and wellbeing, as well as increasing pressure and costs on our health services. There are some brilliant voluntary health support services to combat loneliness, so can the Secretary of State advise me on what plans he has to join up the NHS, health and social care and our voluntary support sector to provide the best possible care for victims of loneliness?

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): My hon. Friend is right about both how widespread loneliness is and the costs. The cross-Government loneliness strategy does indeed join up the voluntary sector and many parts of Government, led by the brilliant Baroness Barran in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. For our part, in this Department we are particularly supporting the growth of social prescribing, which enables GPs to direct their patient to a host of activities, many of which help people to overcome loneliness.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Let us try to keep a sense of perspective. Last weekend, Government sources indicated that the worst-case scenario would be 100,000 deaths due to the current virus outbreak. Given that China has reported just over 3,000 deaths and that it has been at the epicentre of the virus for 10 weeks but has a population 20 times greater than the United Kingdom, was the 100,000 figure a helpful reference?

Matt Hancock: Of course we have to plan for a reasonable worst-case scenario, but we are working incredibly hard to avoid it. The Chinese Government undertook some very significant actions, and it is not yet clear whether the impact of those actions was to slow the spread such that when those actions are lifted the spread will continue, or whether the virus has in effect gone through the population of Hubei. We do not yet know that, so it is not yet possible to interpret the epidemiological consequences of the deaths figure in China.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Last Friday I held an open meeting so that my residents could better understand the proposals for Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals Trust. While I understand that the Minister cannot comment on the consultation, does he not agree that my residents would do better to consider the evidence that shows these proposals will improve access and quality and have no adverse impact on health inequalities?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is right. I do not intend to prejudge the consultation, but I agree that his constituents should look very carefully at the evidence of what it will do to save lives and improve healthcare and respond accordingly.

T6. [901448] **Preet Kaur Gill** (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): In response to an urgent question from the shadow Health Secretary yesterday, the Secretary of State confirmed that emergency legislation being introduced to tackle coronavirus would include changes to statutory sick pay. Can he confirm to the House that the emergency legislation will include specific proposals to remove the lower earnings limit of £118 per week in order to provide access to statutory sick pay for 1.8 million low-paid workers?

Matt Hancock: I can confirm that we will ensure that whatever the status of people working across the economy, whether they are self-employed or employed but working fewer than the set number of hours a week, they will get the support that means they are not penalised for doing the right thing.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): Workforce pressures are rightly on the agenda at the moment, and we hear a lot about recruiting internationally, but what are we doing to promote the home-grown workforce—through training and lifelong learning—and get people to enter the health profession at any time of life?

Helen Whately: There has been much discussion today of international recruitment, but alongside that we are committed to boosting our home-grown workforce, particularly to achieve our ambition of an extra 50,000 nurses in the NHS and 6,000 more GPs.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): At a time when the NHS is under pressure as never before because of coronavirus, does the Secretary of State agree that to close Mildmay Mission Hospital in my constituency would be an act of unbelievable folly? It is a specialist unit for people with HIV/AIDS, and to force those patients into the mainstream would endanger lives. Can he commit today to providing the much needed additional funding of £5 million a year to save this very important hospital, which is doing very important work?

Edward Argar: I welcome, as I am sure we all do, the huge advances in HIV/AIDS care and treatment in recent years. The hon. Member and her trust came to see me recently to discuss this case. Following that meeting, I understand that NHS England, the clinical commissioning group and others met the trust to discuss the issue and the way forward. That is the right forum in which to find the right way forward—a way forward driven by the clinical evidence of the right approach.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): In Windsor we have an ageing but distinguished population, and we recognise that adult social care is one of the biggest challenges facing the country and local authorities. I thank the Secretary of State for his dedication to resolving these issues, with the better care fund allocation and his call for input from MPs, among others. In those discussions, will he have an open mind to the concept of a precept for adult social care for local authorities?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend will be aware that already some of the funding that adult social care receives is through a council tax precept, but I would be delighted to meet him as part of the cross-party talks we have initiated to address the challenges in social care.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): There are numerous reports of people with symptoms of coronavirus being refused a test by 111 because they cannot name an individual who has been diagnosed with the virus. Yesterday the Secretary of State's ministerial colleague, the noble Lord Bethell, said about 111 that there must be people who had had "bad experiences". Will the Secretary of State confirm whether it is indeed policy not to test

those with symptoms who cannot be contact traced, or whether many people are simply having a bad 111 experience?

Matt Hancock: The 111 protocols are of course driven by the clinicians. I will look into the specifics of the case that the hon. Lady mentions was raised in the other place yesterday, but we keep those protocols under constant review—not least as the epidemiology of the virus changes as the number of cases increases—to ensure that we have the very best advice.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Although Blackpool Victoria Hospital has one of the busiest accident and emergency departments in the region, its staff reduced A&E waiting times this winter thanks to changes in the triage process. Will my right hon. Friend congratulate those staff, and will he work with them to ensure that the planned £11 million investment in A&E can reduce waiting times still further?

Matt Hancock: I thoroughly enjoyed my visit to Blackpool. I cannot remember whether it was in November or in the first half of December, but it was very enjoyable. It was great to see what the trusts are planning to do with the extra investment that is coming their way. I also want to congratulate all those at the trust who have done such a fantastic job in deciding how best to ensure that people are treated as quickly as possible. They have improved their systems, they have learnt from what works, and they are doing brilliantly.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Research has shown that CT scans can diagnose covid-19 with 98% accuracy, taking less than 10 minutes. Have the Government any plans to use CT scans in diagnosis?

Matt Hancock: Yes, we are looking at all possible methods of diagnosis, and we have funding to ensure that we can improve the research. Diagnostics must be effective, but our goal is to for them to be done next to the patient and turned around rapidly, which, obviously, is what everyone the world over is seeking.

Mr Speaker: Final question: Philip Hollobone.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the hospitals Minister for his personal attention to Kettering General Hospital, and for the plans for a new £46 million urgent care hub. Can he assure me that progress on the delivery of that facility is on track?

Edward Argar: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. The fact that the money is being invested is largely due to his campaigning efforts and those of his colleagues. I look forward to the opportunity to visit him again soon, and to see progress on the ground when I meet the team.

Turkey-Greece Border: Refugees

12.32 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Foreign Secretary if he will make a statement on what representations the UK Government have made to EU counterparts regarding the situation at the Turkish-Greek border and the refugee crisis in Greece.

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer the urgent question, because the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa is currently travelling back from the middle east.

The Government are very concerned by the situation on the Greek-Turkish border, but we should not allow the crisis to detract from the reality that has created it. Continued brutal violence, particularly in Idlib, by the Syrian regime and its Russian supporters, has driven millions of refugees into Turkey and beyond.

On 3 March, both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary discussed the situation with their Turkish counterparts, and we have also discussed it with the Greek Foreign Minister. Dialogue is key, so we welcomed yesterday's talks between President Erdoğan and European Council President Michel on the 2016 EU-Turkey migration deal. We will continue to support the implementation of that deal, as it is crucial to the effective management of the migratory flows and to preventing people from risking their lives by attempting to cross the Aegean. At the same time, we recognise Turkey's generosity, and the burden of supporting millions of refugees who have fled the civil war in Syria.

Both Greece and Turkey face additional challenges as a result of increased migrant flows, and we are providing support for their response. As well as providing humanitarian assistance in Syria, the UK is providing interpreters in the Greek island hotspots and search and rescue operations in the Aegean, and we are taking part in a range of capacity-building projects with Turkey's Directorate General of Migration Management. We are also working across Government to explore where the UK can provide further support to improve the conditions for migrants, especially the most vulnerable.

As I have said, the principal cause of the migration situation is the reckless and brutal nature of the Syrian regime and the Russian offensive in Idlib. The Syria conflict has been one of the most destructive in recent human history, and we want the war to end as quickly as possible. We very much welcome the recent ceasefire between Turkey and Russia, but it cannot stop there. We also continue to support efforts to renew political dialogue to bring a lasting end to the Syrian conflict. We support the constitutional committee in Geneva as a first step towards obtaining the peace that the Syrian people so desperately need, and we regret that those talks have broken down. The regime and its backers must now demonstrate commitment to resolving this conflict by engaging in good faith with the constitutional committee and with the UN's efforts. Preventing a further worsening of the humanitarian crisis is imperative, and the UK will do all we can to support those in need, while pressing for an end to the Syrian conflict that has impacted so many around the world.

Joanna Cherry: I thank the Minister for his answer. Last Friday, I met my constituent Sally Wainwright to hear about her experiences as a volunteer helping refugees and migrants on the Greek islands. As tensions have risen, mobs have attacked press and aid workers, refugee facilities have been set on fire and non-governmental organisations have had to pull out.

It is clear that the 2016 deal between the EU and Turkey is breaking down. Last week, Turkey decided to open its borders with Greece, and it even bussed migrants close to the north-western border. We have seen the troubling pictures of hundreds of refugees or migrants attempting to land small boats on the Greek islands. Tens of thousands of people have headed for the land border and become trapped between Turkey and Greece. Greece has halted all asylum claims for a month and sent riot police and border guards to turn people back, to deter them from entering the country. Aggressive measures have been employed, and we have seen migrants stripped naked and beaten before being sent back across the border. We have had reports of a refugee being shot dead by live ammunition and of a child dying at sea.

Yesterday, as the Minister said, President Erdoğan visited Brussels for talks, and there have been reports that the EU is considering taking up to 1,500 child refugees from the Greek islands to ease the pressure on the overwhelmed camps. My constituent tells me that hundreds of those child refugees are unaccompanied. In the Prime Minister's Greenwich speech on 3 February, he said that

"the UK is not a European power by treaty or by law but by irrevocable facts of history and geography and language and culture and instinct and sentiment."

British citizens such as my constituent Sally have lived up to that sentiment and done what they can. I want to know what the UK Government are going to do on the ground to ease this humanitarian disaster.

The Government have also spoken about protecting vulnerable children and said that that will remain a priority after Brexit, so may I ask the Minister three specific questions? First, can he tell us what the UK is going to do to ease the plight of child refugees, particularly the unaccompanied ones, on the Greek islands? Secondly, what representations have the UK Government made to Greece and Turkey to end the human rights abuses that have been reported and to ensure that Greece follows the rule of law in relation to asylum applications? Thirdly, how will the UK Government assist the British non-governmental organisations that have been forced to suspend their operations amid concerns about the safety of their staff and their volunteers?

Nigel Adams: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for bringing this question to the House this morning. Clearly, we are extremely concerned about the pressure that the changes at the border have caused. This has put the Greeks in particular under great pressure. We are encouraged by the words of President Erdoğan yesterday, and we hope that the EU-Turkey migration plan can be put back on track. She is absolutely right to say that that has been brought under pressure. We remain absolutely committed to supporting Greece's efforts to manage the migration effectively, but it is imperative that we urge all sides to avoid any actions that may endanger human life. We fully support the rights of states to control their borders, but we expect them to fulfil their international

[*Nigel Adams*]

obligations under the 1951 refugee convention. It is also imperative that the human rights of migrants are protected and promoted.

On resettlement, as the hon. and learned Lady will know, we work closely alongside the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Our resettlement programmes resettle more refugees than those of any other EU member state. In 2018, almost one quarter of all resettlement to the EU was to the UK. We also aim to resettle in the region of 5,000 of the world's most vulnerable refugees in the first year of our new UK resettlement scheme.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that I expect this to run for about 40 minutes.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): First, may I place on record the thanks I think we should all give the Turkish Government for their work in hosting so many refugees out of Syria? May I also pay huge tribute to the Department for International Development, which I believe is still the largest contributor of aid to the region, contributing more than the whole of the rest of the European Union combined?

What are the Government doing to help the Greek Government not just to guard one of Europe's borders—the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) put it with perhaps a bit more force than some might feel necessary—but to empty the camps, manage the flow of people and offer a proper asylum process?

Nigel Adams: We continue to work across government to come up with a plan to explore what further assistance the UK can provide to improve the conditions for migrants. The EU has pledged all the support necessary, including €700 million, half of it immediately. We continue to have dialogue. We are talking not just with our Greek friends, but with the Turkish. The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have raised this issue in the past week.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and I also thank the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) for securing it. As she has rightly said, the behaviour of both Greece and Turkey towards the refugees stuck on their mutual border is utterly shameful—Turkey for wilfully putting them in that impossible position in the first place, knowing that there is nowhere for them to go; and Greece for its unacceptable, heavy-handed response, including the use of tear gas and water cannon, even against people in flimsy dinghies in treacherous conditions.

Much as the self-interested sympathies of Germany and other neighbouring EU countries may lie with the Greek Government, there is no right or wrong in this crisis. Turkey is using the threat of a refugee crisis as leverage to scare up EU and NATO support for its disastrous intervention in Idlib, and Greece is ignoring its obligations under the refugee and human rights conventions by responding with such brutality. Both are equally in the wrong and should stand equally condemned, both legally and morally. The question is: where do we go from here? While there are no easy answers, there are, as ever, two starting points.

First, is the welfare of unaccompanied children and adolescents at severe risk of exploitation, neglect and abuse? Can the Minister give us his estimate of how many children and adolescents are affected? He has been asked this question several times by several Members, so I will ask again: will the UK be joining Finland, France, Germany, Luxembourg and Portugal in offering these children help?

Secondly—again, as always—we must address this crisis at source and stem the increasing outflow of refugees from Idlib. We therefore urgently need an internationally agreed political solution to end the war in Syria, with the safe and peaceful resettlement of refugees at its heart. May I therefore ask the Minister, in closing, what action is currently being taken towards that end?

Nigel Adams: The right hon. Lady is right to raise those points. We are absolutely focused on supporting the response of the Governments in that region. We continue to provide support to Greece in the migrant camps, with half a million pounds of funding for humanitarian supplies for those hotspot islands that have been affected, as well as crucial search and rescue operations in the Aegean sea. Key to this is the EU-Turkey deal of 2016, which has reduced the pull factors and led to a significant reduction in the number of people attempting that dangerous crossing. We are very keen, and will support all efforts, to ensure that those talks land in a satisfactory conclusion.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The whole House will be grateful to the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) for raising this matter and to the Minister for his measured statement and for pointing out that Britain has been by far the largest contributor of humanitarian relief. Will he bear in mind two specific points? The first is that Turkey has been fantastically generous in its support for refugees and migrants. Indeed, there are many who have faced the dreadful misery of all this who owe their lives to the Turkish support. Secondly, Europe—and that must inevitably mean the European Union above all—has failed to come up with the right solutions and, in particular, to forge a comprehensive approach to tackling the migratory crisis and misery.

Nigel Adams: There is not a lot to disagree with in what my right hon. Friend says. The European Union has very much pledged all the support that is needed, and that includes the rapid border intervention team. We are committed to providing at the root source of the problem, and let us not forget what the root cause of the problem is: the Syrian regime and the Russian forces, in particular their actions in Idlib. Last week, we announced a new package—a further £89 million in humanitarian aid—to help save lives and protect those Syrians who are at an increasing risk of violence in Idlib.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I commend the Minister for his statement as far as it went. It is right that we were focusing on the talks in Brussels with President Erdoğan and the EU Ministers. It is a matter of great sadness to me that the UK was not in that room and was not in those talks. Can the Minister assure us that the UK will continue to act in concert with the international community? I likewise pay tribute to the Turkish Government for the major humanitarian efforts they have undertaken to

date. The UK is in a position to influence the Turkish Government on this. As a NATO ally and as a major donor, we are in a position to make a difference.

To pick up on the point we have heard already about unaccompanied minors, the organisation Safe Passage estimates that there are 1,800 unaccompanied children right now on the Greek islands, and the international community has pledged, as we have heard, to look after them. But the UK is in a position to act right now. Can the Minister again give us some information about how many children the UK will take in?

Nigel Adams: What I can tell the hon. Gentleman is that we are pushing for a more co-ordinated global management of migration that promotes greater responsibility at source. As I mentioned in one of my earlier responses, in the new UK resettlement scheme, we are aiming to settle in the region of 5,000 of the world's most vulnerable refugees. Previously, we have helped more than 22,800 refugees: our initial target was 20,000. The vast majority, as he will know, were Syrian refugees, and clearly, if they are the most vulnerable, that is likely to include high numbers of children.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): A lasting political settlement in Syria is key to addressing this tragic issue, but meanwhile there are so many people who are stranded and struggling in Greece and on Greek islands. I welcome the Government's commitment to look at more ways to help those migrants in the situation they find themselves in. Meanwhile, there are a lot of aid agencies and local agencies that are working—in my constituency, Hope and Aid Direct volunteers are going to the Greek islands to help people there. Will my hon. Friend join me in commending the wishes of so many people to help out during this time of need?

Nigel Adams: Absolutely. NGOs, volunteers and support organisations are crucial in helping those who are in difficulty in the camps. We continue to be focused on supporting the Government's responses in the region, and I join my hon. Friend in commending all those organisations that are putting the work in.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), the shadow Foreign Secretary, and the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) have already asked about child refugees, who are vulnerable by any definition. Can the Minister please confirm that the Government are joining the coalition of the willing led by the German Government to relocate 1,500 child refugees to try to help with some of the pressures in this crisis?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. He will be aware that this matter has to be discussed with Home Office representatives, but I repeat the fact that our resettlement programmes have resettled more refugees than any other EU member state. Under our new scheme, at the risk of repeating myself, we aim to resettle in the region of 5,000 of the most vulnerable refugees in the first year.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I spent a few months volunteering on the island of Lesbos at the height of the crisis in 2016. We worked to pull refugees

out of the ocean, and we worked with unaccompanied minors who were deeply traumatised. Will my hon. Friend please confirm that we will always be on the side of humanitarian workers who simply want to save lives? Will he raise with his Greek and EU counterparts the abuses by Greek forces and Frontex, the EU force, against refugees, which I personally saw at first hand?

Nigel Adams: Indeed. I commend my hon. Friend for her work on Lesbos, which is one of the islands that is very much under pressure. As she will know, we are one of the largest donors to the crisis in the region. We will continue to provide assistance in the affected area, as well as in Syria, and it is not just the Foreign Office. The Department for International Development, in particular, has been a significant donor and is committed to pushing projects inside Syria, as well as in the affected area.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): In many ways, the EU-Turkey deal of 2016 has allowed the EU to bury its head in the sand on this situation. We know refugees will flee wherever they can through whatever method they can, so a lot of refugees are not in established or recognised refugee camps but on the islands, not because they have chosen those places but because they were the first place of safety. What are the UK Government doing to rehouse, move and take responsibility for these refugees, not just those in recognised camps?

Nigel Adams: The United Kingdom is doing a significant amount. We are supporting Turkey to implement the EU-Turkey statement, and the United Kingdom has made €483 million of bilateral and EU budget contributions towards the €6 billion facility for these refugees.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Have the Government formed a view on what Turkey is doing on the ground inside Syria, other than suppressing our allies, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, and supporting Islamist fighting groups?

Nigel Adams: We keep such matters under constant review, and the Foreign Secretary is due to meet Foreign Ministers from the region shortly. I am sure there will come a point when an update to the House will follow.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Minister has mentioned resettlement, and I am glad to hear the commitment to 5,000 places under the resettlement scheme, but I have two questions. What are his Government currently doing to improve access to the resettlement scheme on the ground? I have heard from refugee NGOs that it can be very difficult to get on to the scheme. Also, has the Home Secretary continued negotiations with the EU on the unaccompanied children about whom we have heard so much? We have heard about a letter, but what else has happened?

Nigel Adams: Progress is being made with participating states. We are working very closely with the UNHCR on the referral and transfer of more eligible children, and those transfers continue.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I join others in commending Britain's work. The aid package we have provided is incredible, but that effort is undermined by the fact we have been unable to find a long-term

[Mr Tobias Ellwood]

political solution to Syria. Britain, Europe and the international community—the west—must take some blame for that. Turkey has raised NATO article 4, and the UN Security Council is paralysed because of the Russian veto. Brexit is now done, and we are not distracted by that. May I urge the Government to play a more influential role on the international stage in standing up to state-sponsored aggression?

Nigel Adams: Absolutely, and I am sure all of us in this House condemn the actions we have seen in the region, particularly by the Syrian regime. Let us not forget why we are in this position and why these people are in this position: it is because of the behaviour of the Syrian regime, supported by the Russians. We continue to support efforts to renew political dialogue, and we want a political end to this conflict. Syria, above anybody, needs a negotiated political settlement to end the conflict and to ensure the rights of all Syrians. We support the constitutional committee in Geneva as a first step towards obtaining that peace.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): No matter how much money we put into the efforts of Greece and Turkey in the region, all we are ultimately doing is sustaining a situation that creates an environment in which the people traffickers and others involved in organised crime can flourish. If we are serious about treating refugees with the respect and compassion they deserve, we need to work with our European neighbours to devise safe and legal routes to sanctuary. What are the Government doing to achieve that?

Nigel Adams: Supporting the EU-Turkey managed migration process is key. There is huge pressure on Turkey, and we must thank it for its efforts thus far. It is a matter of regret that the borders were opened in this way 10 days ago, and we want to see this resolved. We are encouraged by yesterday's talks, in which President Erdoğan was involved. We will continue the dialogue with Turkey and hope the process moves on.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that those who are so quick to lay into Turkey would be well advised to visit the Syria-Turkey border, as I did recently, to see the work Turkey has been doing on the part of refugees? Is it the Government's intention to continue with the facility for refugees in Turkey, the EU programme, or will they be funding refugees through another vehicle, perhaps the German housing initiative, which plans to provide temporary housing for Syrian refugees who want to return and whose return can be guaranteed to be safe and dignified?

Nigel Adams: I am not as familiar with that particular programme as my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, but I am sure we will be able to find a full response to that question.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What specific assessment have this Government made of the situation and the number of children caught up in this crisis? The Minister has just said that the UK will do all we can to support those in need, and we have heard

repeatedly about hundreds of unaccompanied child refugees, so what specific additional measures will the UK Government put in place to protect those most vulnerable children?

Nigel Adams: As the hon. Lady will have heard, we are putting significant amounts of humanitarian aid into those border areas, and we are committed. Over 22,800 refugees have already been resettled under UK schemes, and we aim to resettle a further 5,000. Of course, immediate humanitarian aid is required, and we are providing that support—£89 million was committed last week—so I can assure her that the UK has stepped up to the plate in this regard.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): As a nation, we can be incredibly proud of the support and generosity we have shown towards Syrian refugees and others in the region. I am somewhat concerned about the role of the EU in these recent challenges on its border. Can the Minister say a little about the strategic involvement of NATO in these geopolitical matters?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Standing NATO maritime group 2 is deployed in the Aegean sea to support all international efforts to cut the lines of human trafficking and illegal migration. Everyone knows that has been happening and that people are being exploited. Additionally, NATO ships are providing real-time information to the coastguards and the relevant national authorities of Greece and Turkey, as well as to Frontex, which will help them in their efforts to tackle the crisis.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): My constituent Joanna Hudak is working on the Aegean islands with Action for Education, and she points out that 42,000 asylum seekers currently reside there, whereas there is capacity for only 6,000. So further support for these reception centres is welcome, but that is not the comprehensive response needed. Surely the comprehensive response must include the relocation of some of these asylum seekers around Europe, and the UK should be part of that process as well.

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman is spot on, and I could not disagree with him. However, we have to ensure that this process is done in a managed way, which is why we are supporting Turkey, bilaterally, in particular. We have been very proactive in providing significant levels of bilateral support to Turkey and Greece, because it is very important that we manage these migration challenges in a much wider and much more managed way.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I, too, have visited refugee camps in Turkey, on the Syrian border, and it is incredible the amount of aid that Turkey has been giving to refugees, as has the UK. We have provided more humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees than the whole of the European Union put together. Is it not clear that a large share of responsibility for the misery and chaos that has been caused falls to the European Union, which needs to step up to the plate, not only on humanitarian aid, but in sorting out the chaotic asylum in Greece and in securing the external EU border?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend raises a good point, but we should not allow that to detract from the reality that has created this situation, which is the continued brutal violence, particularly in Idlib, of the Syrian regime and its Russian supporters, which has driven millions of refugees into Turkey and beyond. He is right to say that the UK as a whole should be proud of the part we have played thus far.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Some 5.5 million people have been forced to flee brutal war in Syria, with more than 3.5 million fleeing to Turkey. The European countries have refused to do their fair share and instead have built a fortress to keep out people in need of safety. That is what we are witnessing at the Greek border. In the light of that, will the Government finally do what is right and significantly step up efforts, including by opening up safe and legal routes?

Nigel Adams: I am sure the hon. Lady will agree with my earlier point that we should absolutely condemn the offensives in Idlib. We must also welcome the ceasefire. We have repeatedly called for an immediate end to this, but preventing the further worsening of the humanitarian crisis is a key priority for us. Much more must be done to bring forward a lasting political settlement.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am not sure that the Minister responded to the question put by my right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary about whether the UK will be joining countries such as France and Finland in the commitment they have made to these vulnerable children.

Nigel Adams: I have made the commitment that under our new resettlement scheme we aim to resettle 5,000 of the world's most vulnerable refugees. On the agreement that the hon. Lady refers to, I am more than happy to get her a detailed response.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The Minister will be as worried as everybody else about the reports of the refugee camp being burned and of the vigilante groups on the ground. What support are the Government giving, particularly to NGOs, to help to de-escalate the situation out there?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman is right to mention the incidents that have been reported. It is fair to point out that the Greeks are under considerable pressure. We remain committed to supporting their efforts to manage migration effectively, but we would say to Greece and to all sides that they must avoid any actions that may endanger life. We continue to support the humanitarian work in the area. I mentioned the half a million-pound funding for humanitarian supplies for islands that are particularly affected—the hotspots—by the current crisis.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The situation on the border in Turkey is appalling, and a meaningful ceasefire and lasting peace are badly needed. When will the UK Government finally step up to the plate and use their influence to end this abhorrent conflict?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman brings, at the end of this session, the most sensible question about the root cause. We want a lasting ceasefire. We welcome the announcement that Turkey and Russia have agreed a ceasefire in Idlib. We have consistently called for such a lasting ceasefire. Preventing a further worsening of the humanitarian crisis, however, is our priority. On 3 March, the Prime Minister spoke to President Erdoğan to express condolences for the deaths of the Turkish soldiers in Idlib and support Turkish efforts to negotiate a cessation of hostilities. As I have said, the Foreign Secretary conveyed those messages to the Turkish Foreign Minister and President during his visit to Ankara on 3 and 4 March.

Point of Order

1.5 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In January, I had it confirmed that the 2018 report on the factors driving food bank usage was complete. In oral questions, I asked the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions why the report had not been published, but she did not even know that the report existed. I have since received a letter from the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), who has responsibility for welfare delivery, advising me that the report is not complete and that there is no date for its publication. This is not the first time the Government have suppressed a report on food banks. Can you advise me how I can elicit some clarity on the status of this report and its publication date?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her question. It is certainly on the record for others to listen to, but it is not something for the Chair. My advice would be to pursue it, with advice from the Table Office. I am sure that the people there will assist her in getting the answer she wishes to have.

BILL PRESENTED

VICTIMS OF ABUSE (SUPPORT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Munira Wilson, supported by Wendy Chamberlain, Layla Moran, Daisy Cooper, Sarah Olney, Christine Jardine and Wera Hobhouse, presented a Bill to establish a right to specialist sexual violence and abuse support services for victims of sexual, violent and domestic abuse; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 March, and to be printed (Bill 109).

Aviation Banning Orders (Disruptive Passengers)

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

1.7 pm

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for court orders to prohibit disruptive passengers from flying.

Hardly a day goes by when there is not a report of a violent passenger on an aeroplane who has assaulted cabin crew, threatened people, and otherwise endangered the safety of an aeroplane or those on it. This Bill aims to prevent those convicted of such behaviour from being able to get back on another plane for a period of time set by the courts.

In the past 12 months, an estimated 4,145 incidents of disruptive behaviour took place on UK planes. That represents a 9% increase on the year before, compared with a general 3% increase in the number of passengers, which means that so-called “air rage” is undoubtedly on the increase. This Bill would enable the courts to ban people for a period of time from flying on commercial planes if they are convicted of using or threatening violence on a plane, or otherwise endangering the safety of an aircraft. We currently ban people from driving if a criminal offence is committed in a car. We ban people from football matches if they take part in hooliganism. We even ban people from being directors of companies, but we happily allow people who assault airline staff to get back on a plane without any power from the courts to stop that. Airlines can ban people from using their own company again, but they cannot ban them from using others, and so letting the courts stop the worst offenders will not only help protect cabin crew and passengers, but act as a deterrent to anyone tempted to be violent on a plane. This Bill is not a silver bullet that will end this problem, nor is this perhaps the most pressing issue for the airline industry today, which is taking a hit over the coronavirus crisis, but it is a simple measure that can add to a range of measures to deal with this serious and growing problem.

Some people have said to me that the solution to this whole problem is just to ban alcohol from aeroplanes or airports, but I disagree. It is correct to say that about half of all incidents of violence on a plane are alcohol-related, but although more can be done to stop duty-free alcohol being consumed on planes, we should not ignore the fact that the vast majority of people who have a drink or two on a plane or at an airport cause no problems whatsoever. It is the selfish, violent behaviour of a few people that we need to target, not the innocent actions of the overwhelming number of passengers who drink responsibly.

Violent air passengers are a particular danger. The confined nature of an aeroplane makes an out-of-control individual a cause for far more concern than such an individual on any other mode of transport. It can be terrifying for nervous fliers and deeply worrying for everyone on a plane on which just one person is acting in a violent manner. If there is a group of people, the situation is much worse. Cabin crew should not have to deal with such incidents and should be protected by this place when carrying out their duties.

Just the day before yesterday, a Jet2 flight had to divert from Turkey to Croatia because of a 60-year-old man who became violent. I know that Jet2 does not tolerate incidents of that kind; indeed, the whole aviation sector seems keen to work together to stop unruly passengers getting back on planes. I hope that the Minister responsible for aviation, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), who is in her place, will work with the industry to find a way forward, through either legislation or some kind of voluntary code.

We need to send out the message that if someone is going to get on a plane and disrupt that flight by threatening violence, being violent or in any other way endangering that flight, they will not be allowed to fly. Decent people and crew should not have to put up with it. This small, simple measure can help to keep flights safer.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Gareth Johnson, Craig Whittaker, Tracey Crouch, Gareth Bacon, Craig Mackinlay, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi and Henry Smith present the Bill.

Gareth Johnson accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 January 2021, and to be printed (Bill 110).

Telecommunications Infrastructure (Leasehold Property) Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

Clause 1

CODE RIGHTS IN RESPECT OF LAND CONNECTED TO
LEASED PREMISES

1.13 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I beg to move amendment 2, in clause 1, page 2, line 3, after “lessee in occupation” insert

“, or a person who is a legal occupant of the property and who is in a contractual relationship with the lessee or freeholder;”.

This amendment is intended to expand the definition of persons who can request an operator to provide an electronic telecommunications service to include rental tenants and other legal occupants who may not own the lease to the property they occupy.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 1, page 2, line 16, at end insert—

“(f) the operator does not, after 31 December 2022, use vendors defined by the National Cyber Security Centre as high-risk vendors.”

Amendment 4, page 2, line 16, at end insert—

“(f) the operator does not use designated high-risk vendors, as defined by the National Cyber Security Centre, in newly deployed electronic communications services.”

This amendment would prevent vendors designated as high-risk being used by operators granted Part 4A orders.

Amendment 3, page 5, line 14, at end insert—

“(8) Any operator exercising Part 4A code rights is obliged to ensure that alternative operators can easily install the hardware needed to provide their own electronic communications service.

(9) The definition of ‘easily’ in sub-paragraph (8) is to be provided by Ofcom.”

This amendment is intended to ensure that tenants are not “locked in” to using services provided by a single operator and to encourage market competition.

Amendment 5, page 5, line 14, at end insert—

“(8) Any operator exercising Part 4A code rights must publish a plan setting out how they will remove high-risk vendors, as defined by the National Cyber Security Centre, from their network.”

This amendment would ensure companies exercising part 4A rights have clear plans in place to remove vendors who are designated high-risk and a national security concern.

Amendment 6, page 6, line 37, at end insert—

“Information on cyber security

27HH Any operator exercising a Part 4A code right must provide written information to new customers in the target premises on best practice on cyber security when using the electronic communications service that has been provided.”

This amendment would require operators to equip new customers with literature on how best to keep their home cyber secure, particularly in the era of the Internet of Things and with recent reports of hacked domestic devices such as baby monitors.

Chi Onwurah: I welcome the Secretary of State to his place. It is somewhat surprising to see him, as my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) had expected to see him in the Commonwealth debate yesterday and I was expecting to see the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) today. As I understand it, after saying almost nothing over

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weeks in his post, the Secretary of State's first moment at the Dispatch Box may be to reverse completely the Government's position on part of the Bill. That raises the question: what information has changed and did the Government know what they were doing in the first place?

As we are taking all the amendments together, I shall consider the whole Bill. It is a great pleasure to speak on the Bill as shadow Minister for Digital. I have an interest to declare: before entering the House, I worked as a telecommunications engineer for 23 years, rolling out telecoms infrastructure in countries as diverse as Germany, Nigeria, Britain and Singapore. I am passionate about digital technology and the positive difference it can make; however, the 10 years for which I have been in Parliament have coincided with a rapid decline in the relative quality of our telecoms infrastructure under successive Conservative Administrations. Without the required ambition, this Government risk wasting a decade more.

The UK has a proud technological history, from the earliest days of the industrial revolution to the invention of the first fibre-optic cable and, of course, the worldwide web. That is why it was with such regret that on Second Reading I highlighted the fact that the OECD ranks us 35th out of 37 for broadband connectivity, even though ours is the fifth largest economy, and that 85% of small and medium sized enterprises said that their productivity was adversely affected by unreliable connections in 2019.

Sadly, our wasted 10 years in telecoms have not been limited to fixed infrastructure; both mobile and the online infrastructure of regulation have also been left to languish, reducing the impact of the Bill. Conservative Governments have entrenched the digital divide in the United Kingdom: 11 million adults lack one or more digital skills and 10% of households do not have internet access. At this rate, in 2028 there will be 7 million people without digital skills, which is tantamount to leaving one in 10 of our population permanently disenfranchised. Our part-time Prime Minister has changed his tune—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"]

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I suspect I am going to agree with some of the things that the hon. Lady says later in her speech, but before we get to that point, let us not be too prissy about the party political element of this matter. The original problem with our telecoms industry started with the asset stripping of the industry by the Labour Government under Gordon Brown, with the spectrum auctions. The hon. Lady should recognise that if she is to make a sensible case.

Chi Onwurah: I, too, look forward to the point at which we agree on something, but let us be absolutely clear about this: the telecoms infrastructure that the Labour Government oversaw was, in terms of competition and investment, an example for the world. If he does not believe that, the right hon. Gentleman can consult the figures.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The hon. Lady is, of course, making her party point—I accept that—but in 2003 it was a Labour Government, under one T. Blair, who allowed Huawei into the UK in the first place.

Chi Onwurah: The hon. Gentleman anticipates some of what this debate is about, but I point out to him that in 2003 there were no relevant powers or requirements on operators to notify when a foreign supplier became part of the network. More broadly, we are not, and I hope the hon. Gentleman is not, saying that the presence of suppliers from, or investment in our country by, different countries such as China—the Government have overseen huge investment in our infrastructure by the Chinese—is by definition wrong; we are saying clearly that we need to put in place plans to mitigate and manage that presence and investment. The Government are not doing that. The hon. Gentleman talks about avoiding party political debates, but he is making historical party political points.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): May I gently point out to the hon. Lady that when she uses the Labour party sneer of the month about the part-time Prime Minister, she might like to look behind her and discover that there is precisely one person on the Labour Back Benches? She appears to be speaking for a part-time political party.

Chi Onwurah: I admire the fact that the right hon. Gentleman compares the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom with Back-Bench Labour MPs. I entirely agree that many Back-Bench Labour MPs contribute far more to the effective government of this country than the Prime Minister, who is not to be seen in our flood-devastated regions. I do not want to ask too much of you, Mr Speaker, so I will try to make some progress. First, though, let me say to hon. and right hon. Members that if they examine the record of the infrastructure competition that was in place until 2010—I was working for Ofcom at that time—they will see that there was far greater infrastructure competition then than there is now.

Tom Tugendhat: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way on that point. In her time did she, by any chance, come across the Rifkind report that criticised the then Labour Government for the decisions that they had made? Did she read it in any way, or did she have any views on it when it was published?

Chi Onwurah: I have to say that I do not remember reading the Rifkind report, which suggests that it did not make a significant impression, as it was my job to look at the management of the network. The hon. and right hon. Gentlemen on the Conservative Benches—there are many of them—are trying to accuse the last Labour Government of neglecting in some way our telecoms infrastructure, but it is totally clear that, over the 10 years of the last Labour Government, we rolled out broadband infrastructure to 50% of this country. If that is neglect, we would like to see a little bit more neglect like that at the moment.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con) *rose*—

Chi Onwurah: I wish to make some progress, but I will be happy to give way in a while.

What the Prime Minister promised was full fibre by 2025. Then he downgraded that pledge to universal "gigabit-capable" broadband, and then, in the Queen's Speech, the pledge was watered down further to "accelerating the roll-out" of gigabit-capable broadband. I am pleased that, in this Bill, the Government appear

to be acknowledging the limitations of a market free-for-all and now propose a number of minor measures to ease infrastructure build-out by giving operators more power to access apartment blocks when requested by tenants.

This is a mediocre Bill. On Second Reading, the Minister spoke of

“taking the first hammer blow to the barriers preventing the deployment of gigabit connectivity.”—[*Official Report*, 22 January 2020; Vol. 670, c. 358.]

This is not a hammer; it is not even a toy hammer. It is like one of those sponge hammers that may make you feel better, but actually does nothing at all. This Bill does not go far enough in solving the problems brought about by a wasted decade in which the Tories allowed the re-monopolisation of broadband infrastructure and failed to take advantage of the world-leading position left by the last Labour Government. If the Government genuinely believe in the levelling up of the UK’s broadband, the Prime Minister has to do far, far more than this.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Could the hon. Lady give the House some guidance on the amendment proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and the three different versions of something that looks similar in the name of the Leader of the Opposition? I would like to understand why the Opposition are taking a different line from that of my right hon. Friend, and what that amounts to.

Chi Onwurah: The right hon. Gentleman anticipates the point that I was about to make in my speech, and I will clarify the differences.

Despite the lack of ambition in this Bill, we will not be opposing it. The Government are taking baby steps when it comes to digital infrastructure, but we will not stand in their way. Indeed, we will help them. We will be pushing a set of practical amendments in line with the Government’s stated intentions on tenants’ rights, competition and excluding high-risk vendors from UK telecommunications networks in the absence of the management and mitigation plans that we have been promised. There is also an important amendment on cyber-security education.

Amendment 2 expands the definition of persons who can request an operator to provide an electronic communications service to include rental tenants and other legal occupants who may not own the lease to the property that they occupy. Although the Bill’s explanatory notes and comments from the Minister suggest that tenants can make the request, the Bill itself does not make that clear, referring to them as lessees. Many tenants are desperate for gigabit broadband to enable them to work from home or grow their business. What if the landlord is difficult to reach or indifferent to their situation? Should not the person who actually lives in the building have some rights?

I will not try your patience, Mr Speaker, by expounding at length on the dire state of both home ownership and leasehold—or fleecehold as it is more properly known. The Government could end the misery of millions if they took on the large landowners and followed Labour’s commitment to end leasehold altogether. The system is broken, and that is one reason home ownership rates among young people are a third lower than they were in the early noughties. There are 4.5 million households in

the private rented sector. We know also that tenants can easily find themselves in precarious and insecure circumstances through no fault of their own, or even with nowhere to live as a result of a section 21 notice. We therefore have a large proportion of our population condemned to renting for life, but with few rights and less certainty. Although the Government seem unwilling to address the housing crisis, they could, at the very least, ensure that tenants benefit from this legislation, and that is what our amendment seeks to do.

Much of the publicity around today’s debate relates to amendments 1 and 4, which seek to limit or prevent operators with high-risk vendors in their networks from taking advantages of the provisions of this Bill. Mr Speaker, as this is an issue of national security, I do hope that you will forgive me if I take quite some time to discuss these amendments.

My first job when I left Imperial College was with Nortel, a Canadian world leader in the then emerging telecommunications sector. If someone had said to me that a couple of decades later we would be incapable of building a European telecoms network without a Chinese vendor, I would have been astonished. Essentially, though, that was the Government’s position when they confirmed that Huawei would be allowed to participate in the UK’s 5G network, despite national security concerns. Huawei is bound by China’s National Intelligence Law 2017 to “support, co-operate and collaborate in national intelligence work.” We are not Sinophobes or Chinese conspiracy theorists. We do not believe that trade and cultural exchange with China are a bad thing, as some have suggested. There are also many great people working for Huawei in this country dedicated to improving our national infrastructure.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): We are going to venture into this subject in depth, but I just wonder whether the hon. Lady agrees with me on the following. When we are developing a relationship with China—yes, perhaps we want China to do business on level terms with us—is it right that Huawei, as she has described, is able to be used by its intelligence services, but western companies such as Apple, Amazon and eBay are not even allowed to operate in China under the terms and conditions that they are freely able to operate in the west?

Chi Onwurah: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He raises two important points: one of reciprocity between how Huawei acts and how vendors from Europe and the US are able to act in China; and also one of the risks associated with that potential relationship with the Chinese security services. It is a risk that has been examined by the National Cyber Security Centre.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. We are minded to support the Labour amendments because of the designation of the National Cyber Security Centre. However, what impact does she think that it will have on the roll-out of 5G? How much time are the UK Government likely to lose in terms of rolling out 5G across the UK?

Chi Onwurah: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his proposed support. He raises another important point, which I will address immediately. First, we do not want

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to think that the involvement of Chinese companies in our network infrastructure is necessarily an unmanageable security risk—I am choosing my words very carefully—but we do believe that it represents a risk. We believe that because that is what our security services say. The National Cyber Security Centre has designated Huawei as a high-risk vendor. That is why it set up the Huawei Cyber Security Evaluation Centre. I thank the NCSC for meeting me and for giving the Opposition a detailed security briefing. I have also sought advice from industry experts.

1.30 pm

As the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) suggested, tearing Huawei out of our networks—to be clear, Huawei is already present in our networks, it is in different positions in the networks and it is in different networks but particularly in 4G, which is the platform for 5G—would mean significant costs and delays: Mobile UK, the trade organisation for the mobile industry, estimates that it would cost £7 billion and delay 5G by 18 months. The telecoms supply chain review, which was published in July, set out the ways in which the risks could be managed and mitigated. In reporting on that review to the House, the Government made several promises around diversifying the supply chain and putting in place a regulator with strong enforcement powers. Seven months later, we have heard nothing. In July, the Government promised to legislate at the earliest possible opportunity. Well, now is that opportunity.

As the Government have refused to put in place any legislation or even to share plans—or plans for plans—we are taking matters into our own hands, hence our amendment 4, which would prevent operators from taking advantage of the provisions of the Bill if they were using high-risk vendors in their deployment. It would effectively mean that the reach of high-risk vendors would not be allowed to grow as a result of this legislation. The legislation is narrow; our amendment reflects that narrowness, but seeks to prevent high-risk vendors from having an increased foothold in our networks as a consequence of this legislation.

Mr David Davis: May I draw the hon. Member back to the question of what we mean by a high-risk vendor? Quite rightly, she is focused on the security element, but in a throwaway line she talked about the attitude to trade with China. The whole concept of global trade requires a rules-based environment and proper behaviour by all the players. As far as we can tell, China seems to subsidise Huawei to the point that it can act in a predatory pricing mode towards western companies, with the clear aim of removing those companies from competitive pressure. Although that point is not as important as the national security issue, is it not still very important in its own right?

Chi Onwurah: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point, so I will deal with it in some detail. I am limiting most of my remarks to reflect the work of the National Cyber Security Centre because it has done a great deal of work in this area and it is an offshoot of our security services. We trust it. As our national security is in the hands of our security services, I place my confidence with them.

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Chi Onwurah: I will just finish addressing the previous point and then come back to my hon. Friend.

The point made by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) regarding the financial viability of the sector as a whole is incredibly important. If players in the sector—operators or vendors—fail, there will be an impact on the network and therefore on our security as it is part of our critical national infrastructure. The Huawei business model appears to be dependent on having really deep pockets, which means that it can undercut other vendors in tender processes.

Bob Seely: Will the hon. Member give way?

Chi Onwurah: May I just finish this point?

There are two consequences of Huawei undercutting other vendors: market share, and the dependence of operators on Huawei as a vendor. The networks that Huawei offers or builds are genuinely vendor-specific and operator-specific, which increases dependence hugely. I recognise the point made by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden, and I think it is important for national security as well as for our economic security.

Sir Mark Hendrick: As the shadow Minister will be aware, the Government made an announcement on 28 January that they were going to give a very limited role to Huawei in the development of the infrastructure. They have also taken advice from GCHQ and the NCSC about the level of involvement that Huawei should have. Why does she disagree with that? [Interruption.]

Mr Ellwood: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Colleagues in a sedentary position have reminded me that there is a declaration of interest to be made, so I humbly ask the hon. Gentleman if he would state his relationship with Huawei.

Sir Mark Hendrick *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. A point of order should go through the Chair. It is either an intervention or a point of order; it cannot be both.

Mr Ellwood: I was trying to be courteous to the situation, Madam Deputy Speaker, but the message has now been given.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I hope that Members will not interrupt the debate with too many points of order. I am sure that the hon. Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick) is clear that if there were any need to make a declaration, I would expect him to do so.

Sir Mark Hendrick: Yes, I was about to do so, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have consulted the Speaker's Office—as it will confirm—and checked this point, and I wish to declare a visit to the Huawei factory 10 years ago.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I say in a polite fashion to the hon. Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick), who is my friend outside this Chamber, that he is also holding a Huawei reception next week. Perhaps he could declare that. I do not want him to get into trouble—I really don't.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. As I have said, I am sure that the hon. Member for Preston will make any declarations necessary, and I hope that he has sought advice on the issue.

Sir Mark Hendrick: I have written to every Member in this House inviting them to the reception next week, but it is not a declarable interest.

If there are no more points of order, may I just ask the shadow Minister why she does not feel that it is appropriate to take the outlined course of action, given the evidence from GCHQ and the NCSC about Huawei's limited role and the management of risk?

Chi Onwurah: My hon. Friend raises a really important point. It is worth clarifying that we support the position of the NCSC and I have said that the risks can be managed, but the fact is that we see no evidence that the risks are being managed. They are not being managed in the way in which the NCSC has said that they can, should and need to be managed. There is no evidence of that, and that is the key reason for amendment 4.

Amendment 1, in the name of the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), is similar in some ways to our amendment. The House will not be surprised to learn that I disagree passionately with him and many of his hon. Friends about many very important issues, but we have a shared concern for our national technological capability and our national security. Labour's amendment 4 differs from his amendment in two ways. First, our amendment would apply with immediate effect, whereas amendment 1 would apply from 2023. Secondly, our amendment would only apply to newly deployed infrastructure, whereas amendment 1—as I understand it—would apply universally, to all telecommunications network deployment.

I differ from some Government Members on the nature and level of the threat from Huawei. As I said, I follow the guidance of the National Cyber Security Centre, but the problem is that we have no indication that the Government are following that guidance. There is no legislation. There is no plan for legislation. There is no detail on the nature of the regulator. We understand that it is proposed that Ofcom would take up these regulatory powers, but what are the powers, and what are the resources at a time when Ofcom is also being asked to regulate not only the BBC but the internet? What are the resources, what are the powers and what are the enforcement mechanisms?

Meanwhile, people across the country are concerned. Constituents have written to me to ask if their data has to flow over high-risk infrastructure. They may be objecting on security grounds or, equally, on their understanding of the human rights and employment rights record of Huawei in China, but either way they do not understand the Government's lack of action.

In tabling this amendment, we are not only, as it were, bringing problems to the Government—we are also offering solutions. I have made detailed proposals for potential ways in which we can diversify our telecoms supply chain: an industrial strategy for the telecommunications sector based around a five-point plan involving standards, research and development, a new catapult centre, working with the Department for International Development and with Commonwealth and emerging markets, and support for non-5G wireless technologies. All of this is to enable innovation around networks, business models and more.

The good news is that in tech you are never so far behind that you cannot leapfrog existing technology. The bad news is that it takes investment and strategic vision—qualities, I am afraid, that this Government appear to lack. Huawei is a test of both. Last week, in the Westminster Hall debate secured by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green, I put 10 questions to the Minister, which he was unable to answer. I will not repeat them here, but—[*Interruption.*] The Minister appears surprised from a sedentary position. I did not receive an answer to my 10 questions. I could repeat them here, but I have written to him to give him the opportunity to encourage the Secretary of State to do so later. Truly, it astounds me that a Government who are, for ideological reasons, apparently reluctant to take initiatives on UK state intervention seem so reluctant to set out how they are going to prevent Chinese state intervention in our industry and our economy.

Amendment 5 is related in that it seeks to ensure that operators who roll out infrastructure as a result of this Bill have clear and published plans in place to remove vendors who are designated high risk and a national security concern. Clearly—I think there has been some consensus on this in the debate—it is for the Government to bring forward the promised plans to manage the presence of high-risk vendors in the network. However, in the absence of such plans, the amendment places a duty of transparency on the operators to publicly report on their use of high-risk vendors and their plans to meet the target of 35% set out by the National Cyber Security Centre.

Amendment 3, which was also tabled in Committee, is critical and relevant to some of the earlier debate regarding the record of the Labour Government. We believe that we can go much further in broadband market competition. During my six years at Ofcom, it was established beyond doubt that telecoms infrastructure competition drives investment, innovation and choice. In relation to the previous debate on high-risk vendors, had we had greater competition, we would have had greater choice and would not be in the position of being dependent on two, or possibly three, suppliers. Under Labour, first generation—

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Quite apart from the security aspect, does not coronavirus show how much more dependent we in the United Kingdom have to become on this sort of technology?

Chi Onwurah: Coronavirus shows the ways in which risks can come from different directions and can be unpredictable. That means, as the hon. Gentleman suggests, that not only are we dependent on technology, particularly with regard to working from home, but that the spread

[Chi Onwurah]

of misinformation around coronavirus creates the need for infrastructure that is not only secure but properly regulated.

It may seem strange for a Labour MP to be giving instruction to a Conservative Government in competitive markets, but I am afraid that my time in this place has taught me that certain Conservatives are all too willing to put vested interests before competitive markets. As the Bill stands, one operator can capture a building, roll out infrastructure to that building, and basically fleece the tenants there forever.

1.45 pm

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Lady knows that I have my own issues with various aspects of Government policy that I hope will be put right, but the idea that diversity and competition are not at the heart of the Government's proposal is, I am afraid, simply not true. The Government are exactly trying to achieve the kind of competition that has fallen out of this market because of the domination of one particular player. While I welcome the Government's intention, the only difference I have is on where we take the risk. So I think that welcoming a little bit of the Government's competition strategy would be a good idea.

Chi Onwurah: In that case, I am sure that the Government will adopt this amendment, which means that the infrastructure that is put in place under the Bill has to be open to other competitors so that one operator cannot capture a building. That is the intention of the amendment; it is not the intention of the Bill. The amendment ensures that tenants are not locked into services provided by a single operator, requiring that the infrastructure can easily be shared.

Amendment 6 recognises the distressing recent reports of hacked baby monitors and suchlike, and poor cyber-security practices that leave many residential users open to cyber-attacks. The amendment is aimed at supporting customers and bedding in best practice for the era of the internet of things, which will increase citizens' data trails exponentially, and therefore the opportunity for cyber-threats, digital surveillance and data exploitation. People, not technology and things, must be at the heart of the internet of things. Through this amendment, we want to ensure the distribution of materials on cyber-security education for new customers getting a telecommunications service as a result of the powers exercised under the Bill.

I started by saying that this is a mediocre Bill. On a scale of zero to 10, in terms of impact on our telecommunications infrastructure, it is about 0.5—with a good wind behind it. It does no harm, but it does very little good. Our amendments seek to change that, delivering for tenants, for competition and for national security.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I rise to speak to amendment 1, standing in my name and in those of my colleagues.

The reason we have tabled this amendment is that we are genuinely concerned, like the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), that this country has got itself far too bound into a process in which we are reliant on untrusted vendors—in this particular case, Huawei. We recently heard a Government

Minister express the view that Huawei is a private company. Let us be absolutely clear at the outset: this company is not a private company. Ultimately, it is essentially almost completely owned by Chinese trade unions, and they, of course, are completely locked into the Chinese Government. This an organisation wholly owned by China.

It is often bandied around, including by some of the security guys the other day, that this is somehow all to do with market failure, as if out of nowhere companies from the west in the free markets—the free world—no longer wanted to get involved in this process. That is completely and utterly without foundation. The single biggest problem we have faced is that, nearly two decades ago, the Chinese Government set out to ensure that they dominated the market. As this organisation has access to nigh-on unlimited funds, it has spent that period underbidding every single time in these processes, from 2G through to 4G and now, as we understand it, 5G.

Mr Ellwood: I commend my right hon. Friend and the others who have put their name to amendment 1 for raising the profile of this difficult and complex issue. I think the Government should be on warning that while the amendment may not be pressed to a Division because of what the Minister says later, this House believes that we need to wean ourselves off Huawei. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is an easy way out of this? There are six global vendors when it comes to 5G: ZTE, Huawei, Ericsson, Nokia, NEC and, of course, Samsung. The last two are not allowed to operate outside Japan and Korea. If they were invited to do so, that would enable us to push away Huawei and ensure that our national infrastructure is protected.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I agree with my right hon. Friend, and I was going to come to those points.

As I saying, if we look at this strategy, we see that when this all began, there were something like 12 companies in this marketplace. One by one, they have disappeared. Why have they disappeared? They simply cannot compete with Huawei's pricing. These telecoms companies—telcos, as we call them—have bit by bit found themselves going to the cheapest bidder, providing the technology is as good as the others. By the way, it is certainly not an argument that Huawei has better technology; there is no evidence of that whatsoever. In fact, I think Dr Ian Levy said a year ago that he thought Huawei's security issues were a shambles, and that is correct. Huawei does not somehow have extra brilliant technology. What it does have, however, is money, which allows it to bid down.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central said that she is a believer in free markets. She will know that the free market relies on companies being able, when they sell their goods, to make enough money to reinvest and improve the quality of their goods. That is how a proper rules-based market works, but not with a company like this, which is able to strip that away. One by one, these companies have gone, not because of market failure but because it has been a policy position of the Chinese Government using Huawei to dominate this market over nearly two decades.

Sir Mark Hendrick: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, but not for long.

Sir Mark Hendrick: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. In America, the break-up of the Bell Telephone Company led to the creation of the “Baby Bells”. Companies are changing all the time. Telecommunications companies across Europe are changing and restructuring all the time. This is no different.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, I have no idea what he was intervening over. There is a free market, and when a free market operates we have competition because companies are set up to solve problems and sell their goods. When a company has unlimited funds and can undercut the others, there is no money for them, they cannot operate and they will go out of business. It is fairly logical for anybody who understands the free market.

Mr David Davis: It is not just subsidy that supports Huawei and undermines its competition. At least some members of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service believe that Huawei started by stealing Nortel’s technology, which ended up destroying Nortel and putting Huawei in a dominant position.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I was going to come to that, but now that he has mentioned it, let us kill this one completely. The reality is that there has been a whole series of attempts—successful ones—to steal technology from other companies in the field, thus driving them out, by finding the edge they have on technology and selling it at a cheaper price. The bidding that took place under the previous Labour Government was raised earlier. I am not blaming the Labour Government for that; that just happens to be the way it was. But the amount paid by those companies was astonishing—about £24 billion to £25 billion—and it left them bereft of cash and desperate for cheap product.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend given consideration to financial/non-financial tariffs that could be applied to Huawei on our exit from the EU, after the transition period, to try to level the playing field? Does he think that the 2022 deadline is realistic?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am always flexible on the date, providing there is an intent and commitment to eradicate the involvement of high-risk vendors in our system across the board, full stop. I think that is a reasonable position, and I will wait to hear what the Government have to say; they will expect me to intervene to ensure that that is as clear as possible.

Tom Tugendhat: The position that my right hon. Friend is arguing for is one that many Government Members and many people in this country agree with—namely, that we should be supporting domestic industry and looking to partner with countries and companies that share not just the technology but the values that underpin that technology. The Government are right to be looking at investing in infrastructure, and we all welcome their investment in broadband, but should some of that investment not perhaps be in UK infrastructure?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I agree with my hon. Friend. This is the other sad part of what has been going on for over a decade. We have watched quietly—it does not matter which party has been in power—as all that ability has been stripped out of the UK. Our last provider was some years ago, and it has gone, so we now rely on the Huawei of this world. Furthermore, all the microprocessors and the chips are not produced here; they are mostly produced in the far east. My point is simple: if this was of strategic importance to us, surely we should have all got together and decided that we need to have these facilities here, so that we can control future development.

The National Cyber Security Centre has produced its security analysis for the UK telecoms sector. Despite all the talk about how it can control things, it is quite clear in paragraph 5.5.2 on page 13 when it says:

“Without government intervention, the NCSC considers there to be a realistic likelihood that due to commercial factors the UK would become ‘nationally dependent’ on Huawei within three years.”

I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke): I put down a date two years from now in my amendment, but the NCSC refers to three years. I want to know what the Government think the risk is and how they will eradicate that.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am conscious that Madam Deputy Speaker does not want me to speak for too long, so I will give way briefly.

Anthony Mangnall: Is my right hon. Friend aware of the Made in China 2025 strategy, which aims to see China extend its influence in telecommunications networks across the world? I find that extremely worrying, and it makes me think that Huawei is not only a high-risk vendor but will become an increasingly risky vendor for our networks.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: We have looked at the past, we are where we are and now we look to the future. That suggests that we will become completely and utterly in thrall to providers that we cannot possibly trust. That is a big security risk, and it is a statement of absence of thought by any Government. If defence of the realm is our No. 1 priority, this becomes demi-defence of the realm, and I am simply not prepared to put up with that.

John Redwood: I thank my right hon. Friend for highlighting and leading on this crucial issue; I fully support him. Will he confirm that there is technology outside China that would do this job perfectly well?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am glad that my right hon. Friend raises that point, which I was going to come to. He is right. There has been a whispered suggestion to many of my colleagues and, I am sure, others—I do not mean that anyone has set out with malicious intent, but with practical intent, I suspect, to head off any would-be vote in the wrong direction—that we have to use Huawei because there is no other way of doing this, but that is simply untrue. Yes, there were 12 companies once upon a time and they are much reduced in number now, but I am aware of at least three that have been involved in 5G

[Sir Iain Duncan Smith]

development or are capable of doing 5G development in what I call the free market world, with all of us, and they are Nokia, Ericsson and Samsung. In fact, Samsung has been involved in the South Korean 5G network anyway, and every one of them says, “We can do this.” The question then is that this will add cost, but I am sorry to say that, in reality, when it comes to security versus cost, my view is that security wins every single time.

Several hon. Members rose—

2 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I will give way in a second, but I am conscious that you want me to make some progress, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I worry when we start compromising security. I worry—and this is the point I want to make—that we have no friends out there any more on this issue. The Canadians, the Americans, the Australians and the New Zealanders all disagree with us. I know there is sometimes a habit in this country of people quietly and smugly saying, “Well, we’re better than they are”, and I understand that. It may be the suggestion of the Security Council—[*Interruption.*] Well, you know what it is like. I learn a lot from my nationalist colleagues. [*Interruption.*] I do; I used to live there.

The point is that when people say that smugly, the answer is, “No, we’re not.” The Australians are adamant that they do not believe it is possible to manage this process, and everyone else from the Americans onwards says the same. The Japanese are absolutely seething with us over this because it undermines them, and they are of course very close to what they consider to be a threat. Then we get others, people whom we are not necessarily close to, such as the Vietnamese, who do not even want to do this because they recognise that there is a real threat. My point is that, once we add this all up, there is simply nobody out there who agrees.

I therefore very simply say this: no matter how intelligent, brilliant and great our security and cyber-security services are, how is it that they are right and everybody else is wrong? In fact, at a briefing the other day, I saw them trashing the Australian view of this. I simply say, fine, but the reality is that we are alone on this matter, and I think that that is a very bad place to be in relation to our closest allies when it comes to security.

Damian Green: My right hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. Is not the point that Britain’s reputation in this area is very high, and if Britain takes the wrong step and allows Huawei to dominate our telecoms infrastructure for decades, other countries will think that it is the right thing to do? In particular, smaller countries around the world will think, “If the British think it’s okay, then we’ll do it as well”, and this could be the route by which China dominates telecoms infrastructure in many countries around the world for decades to come.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: You know what, I think that is almost the most powerful point. We have a leadership role in this, and many countries look to us. The reason why it is so important, I believe, that Huawei captures this market is very simply that it knows it will be able to

go around to all these other countries that have lesser security than us and say, “Well, you know, the British have got a brilliant reputation, and they’ve said it’s okay, therefore what are you worried about? You don’t even begin to know half of what they know, so now we’ll just sell our goods over here.” The eventual aim of this is to capture most of these networks, and when it has done that, as the National Cyber Security Centre peculiarly said, we may be completely in hock to it because all the other companies will have fallen away, and we will be left with the invidious choice of not doing 6G because we cannot risk it and do not have anybody else to go to. Now is the time to restore our faith in those companies, and give them a chance to compete and to produce the product. They are less risky—I accept there are always risks, but they are far less risky—than the high-risk vendors.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a compelling urgency now? There are significant customers for this equipment that are looking to see what the Government decide. If we fudge it today and we do not have a very clear target date to end the involvement of high-risk vendors, they will be compelled by commercial imperatives to buy from the cheapest vendor, which is Huawei. It is really urgent now to have a clear end date by which we will get to zero.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: My right hon. Friend is correct. I will quote what happened in the debate we held in Westminster Hall, because we heard a really significant final statement. The Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) said—quite rightly, by the way, as I think this is a very good starting point—that

“we will work to move towards no involvement of high-risk vendors.”—[*Official Report*, 4 March 2020; Vol. 672, c. 299WH.]

I want to conclude—and allow others to get into this debate—by simply saying that three things need to happen today. I recognise fully, and I say this to the Secretary of State, having done much the same kind of stuff as him, that it is not easy. I recognise that, strictly speaking, this is not the correct Bill to try to force through the whole change, but my view is any port in a storm. This amendment is a boat in a different port, but perhaps if he so wants, we can move it into the correct port when he brings through the relevant Bill.

I need some absolute clarity from the Secretary of State, as I think do my colleagues. First, we must plan and we need to know that it is the Government’s intention to move to essentially rid ourselves of high-risk vendors from our system. There also needs to be a concept of timescale in this. I want the Government to recognise and to accept that we have to set ourselves the task to do this. I accept that the Government have already said they want to do it with their Five Eyes colleagues—that is a start, because they have not said that before—but we need to work with our real allies to get ourselves into the position where we can actually go on to rid ourselves of these high-risk vendors. I accept that that is not without difficulty, so the Government need to make that pledge very clearly, and they need to give the timescale by which they will have achieved it and commenced the process of winding out those high-risk vendors.

Lastly, if the Government do not want us to try to create trouble on this Bill, they must give an absolutely lock-tight commitment that the Bill relevant to this will return before the summer—categorically before that, and an early as possible, perhaps in May—so that we can properly see these commitments plus others written into that Bill, and we can understand that those are the Government's intentions. It is absolutely critical for me—I will make my mind up on this only when I have heard the words of the Secretary of State—and we need to know, that it is the Government's intention to rid ourselves of high-risk vendors such as Huawei; that it is the Government's intention to do that in the Bill that will come before us; that they will now work aggressively and at speed with our Five Eyes colleagues, inviting them in immediately to create, with all of us, a system that allows us to do that at the earliest opportunity; and that they will commence the absolute beginnings of that retraction before the end of this Parliament. I give way a little bit on those timescales, but I think I am being fairly reasonable.

It is not normally given to me to make any demands, and I am not doing so. I am simply urging my right hon. Friend, his colleagues and anybody else from the Government who is watching—I genuinely understand the difficulties they are in—to please stop lecturing us and saying that there is no other provider and to stop lecturing us about this somehow killing broadband roll-out—it does not. Most importantly, they must remember that the security of the realm is the No. 1 priority, and that is why I have tabled the amendment.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I will not take up too much of the House's time—I have no intention of grandstanding on this issue—but it is always a pleasure to speak on behalf of the Scottish National party and to ensure that Scotland's voice is heard in this debate about a key part of the UK's infrastructure. It goes without saying that digital connectivity is absolutely vital as we seek to grow and evolve our economy. Indeed, full fibre roll-out and the 5G network underpin our progress towards the fourth industrial revolution.

The UK Government, who have responsibility for telecommunications, have a responsibility to ensure that this key driver of our future economic prosperity is appropriately protected and managed. I am pleased that, at a devolved level, the Scottish Government have taken strong action to support digital connectivity. Last month, the Scottish Finance Secretary announced that spending on digital connectivity projects is to double—up to £63.4 million in 2020-21. I want this investment to succeed in providing Scotland with world-class digital infrastructure.

With that in mind, the SNP welcomes the Bill before us today. The SNP acknowledges that the proposals will unlock opportunities for telecoms operators in Scotland that are being prevented from fulfilling consumer demands due to access issues.

The SNP also supports the introduction of laws that would benefit contractors by reducing the costs associated with the delivery of digital infrastructure to multi-dwelling units. The UK Government are entirely right to address any barriers to commercial deployment, and this will complement the Scottish Government's ambitious plans for digital roll-out, particularly through the R100 programme.

I caveat my support by adding that the SNP will continue to monitor developments relating to this Bill. However, I am aware that Scottish Ministers stand ready to engage with their UK counterparts and I believe it would prove beneficial in making this legislation a success in Scotland.

On the amendments, I want to draw particular attention to those addressing high-risk vendors. We cannot ignore the National Cyber Security Centre's determinations on Huawei, which it considers to be a high-risk vendor. We cannot ignore the fact that as a Chinese company Huawei could be ordered to harm UK interests under China's national intelligence law of 2017. Once a virus is placed into our digital system, it cannot be contained by the Government washing their hands of the problem while singing "God Save the Queen."

We now find ourselves in the strange and contradictory position of admitting that Huawei is a potential threat to our national security yet granting it an important role in the development of our digital infrastructure. The UK Government can play around with the semantics of the situation by saying that Huawei will be limited to the periphery or to being a minority presence, but it is deeply irresponsible to dismiss the expert advice.

Sir Richard Dearlove, who led MI6 from 1999 until 2004, said that

"we must conclude the engagement of Huawei presents a potential security risk to the UK."

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that in 5G there is no such thing as a periphery any more? That is the point: the core and the edge are interlinked, and that is what makes the Government's position on this so disturbing.

Ronnie Cowan: I wholeheartedly agree. The whole concept of a 5G network rides roughshod over the concept, which was brought into 2G, 3G and 4G, of a core and a periphery; once anyone is in that network, they are in that network.

This is not an attack on China or the people of China. They have done what we should have been doing; they have built what we should have been building. Because as I understand it, currently there are no wholly owned and run UK companies that can provide the services of a Huawei, a Nokia, an Ericsson or a Samsung. But with guaranteed work and a guaranteed cashflow we could create the perfect environment to grow such a company. Amid the Brexit jubilation did this UK Government not say they were "taking back control"? Well, they should put their money where their mouth is.

Finally, rhetoric in itself will not revitalise or rejuvenate a marketplace. I am asking this UK Government to plan, invest and grow a state-owned digital infrastructure company.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): It is essential in this debate that we do not conflate the issues of trade and security. In order to achieve greater trade with China we do not need to sacrifice our national security by including Huawei.

I worked hard as Trade Secretary to improve our trade with China, and getting better Chinese trade is good, not least for bringing millions—billions—of people out of poverty in that country. That is in itself a good thing, but—and it comes with a very large but—it must,

[Dr Liam Fox]

as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) said, come with a rules-based system.

We know that there is an incredible lack of transparency in China about what is in the state sector and what is in the private sector, and Huawei is a classic example of that. The distinctions that we accept in the free-market west are not accepted in the Chinese system, which is why, for example, it is so able to get around some of the pricing constraints that we put in tenders. It is very unclear how investment is funded. While competitors to Huawei such as Samsung have to make very clear to their shareholders how investment is raised and then spent, that transparency does not exist when it comes to Huawei. When I spoke to Samsung about this issue and asked why it was not at the forefront in countries such as the United Kingdom, its answer was, “Well, we have to invest along with the international rules and we have to account to our shareholders and to the law.” These are not things that apply to Huawei, and in any case the way that the tenders were constructed allows a company that lacks transparency such as Huawei always to underbid. If I wanted to get into someone else’s national infrastructure, and I was able to count on ghost state funding to do so, I would certainly take that opportunity. Why would we be surprised that that happens with Huawei?

Bob Seely: Between 6% and 7% of our overseas export trade is with China, and we are worried about offending it. One third of the Australians’ export trade goes to China. China would therefore have the power to cripple Australian export trade if it chose another supplier for some of those products, but it does not do so, and Australia has said no and ruled out high-risk vendors in its 5G. So the economic risks and the economic threats are much exaggerated.

Dr Fox: Not only are they greatly exaggerated, it is utterly untrue that there is a link between the two. My hon. Friend has made the case perfectly clearly that the Chinese knew that the Australians were ruling out Huawei involvement yet they still trade with Australia, so the argument in this debate is a red herring entirely. This is an issue about national security. Also, in terms of trading and China, we have not yet resolved issues such as dumping, illegal subsidy and intellectual property theft—and that is before we take into account the 2017 national intelligence law.

John Redwood: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that in the important talks between the US and China, the issue of intellectual property theft and the legitimate defence of western technology was absolutely central and the US got guarantees in that deal which we still do not have?

Dr Fox: That was absolutely central, as my right hon. Friend says; whether the guarantees will turn out to be enforceable is a separate issue, however, and that of course points to some of the issues the United States has about Chinese membership of the World Trade Organisation.

Mr David Davis: As my right hon. Friend intimates, there is a massive subsidy from the Chinese state to Huawei, and that is for a purpose. Would he care to expatiate on what that purpose might be?

Dr Fox: In a moment I will come on to why I think our values must be a part of our approach to this particular issue, as well as national security, but there is a key question for the Secretary of State to answer in this debate, and it is a very simple one: do the Government believe that there is any risk to the United Kingdom’s national security if Huawei is involved in our 5G system? The Government cannot talk about a small risk; we do not want there to be a risk at all. One of the things I have found extremely irritating in this whole debate and in many of the briefings that have come forward is the response, “Don’t worry, we can mitigate the risk of Huawei being there.” Why would anyone want to mitigate a risk when they can avoid the risk in the first place?

That goes to the root of the issue. The idea that we must have Huawei because there are no alternatives is untrue. The United States is going to get 5G and it will get it without Huawei, because it will not bring that risk to its own national security. So what is wrong with the United Kingdom having to wait a little longer to get 5G, but to get a 5G that will give us security in the long term—and, as has been rightly said, so what if it costs us a little bit more? The cost is much less than the risk to long-term national security.

2.15 pm

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): We have all heard the Government say that they can mitigate the risks of Huawei being involved in the roll-out of 5G, but my response to those security briefings was that the Government do not have to persuade me; they have to persuade our Five Eyes partners. If the Government cannot persuade the Americans, Australians, New Zealanders and Canadians that they can mitigate the risk, it does not matter whether they can mitigate it or not, as we will lose access to that security information, and that is a price we cannot pay.

Dr Fox: Although I accept my hon. Friend’s point, I think the Government’s first duty is to persuade the House of Commons that we are not taking a risk with our national security.

I want to come briefly to the point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) about reputation. It is beyond doubt that countries around the world will be looking to the United Kingdom to see what decision we make. If we send out the signal that we, a country that is so highly regarded in terms of our national security infrastructure, think it is all right to involve Huawei in our 5G, others will follow. In fact, it is worse than that; we are already being cited as an example by other countries who intend to make that decision. Today, we have an opportunity to pause and say that the United Kingdom cannot be cited as a precedent, because we have not yet taken that decision—and hopefully we never will.

Mr Paterson: My right hon. Friend is making a very powerful point. Does he agree that if we did that, we would be in a tremendous position to work with our Five Eyes partners on a common programme, as suggested by US senators in their letter to MPs last week?

Dr Fox: I could not agree more. This decision comes down to the wider issue of our values and what our world view is. This decision will demonstrate that to

countries around the world. What China wants is to make the world a more permissive place for autocratic regimes. What we need to do is to make the world a more permissive place for those who believe in freedom, democracy and the rule of law. Our national security is intrinsic to protecting those values. The decision we take will say more than just what we intend to do for the 5G network and the internet of things; it will say something about what Britain is and intends to be in the years ahead, and how we intend to shape the world around us.

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. May I take him back a little in his speech? I agree entirely that it is not a good argument for the inclusion of Huawei that not to do so would cost us a little more or take us a little longer, but does he accept that if we pursue our 5G network with other suppliers, it is highly likely that those suppliers will also use Chinese equipment? Therefore, whatever we do with Huawei, it is important to strengthen our entire telecoms supply chain network against all types of threat.

Dr Fox: I entirely agree with my right hon. and learned Friend, and I am grateful to him for raising that point. When I was practising medicine—or, as my wife would say, “When you had a proper job”—I was never inclined to do the cheapest or the fastest treatment. It was always the best treatment and that is what we have to apply here. This is a much more important issue. If we have to wait a little longer and pay a little more for the security of this country, then we should do just that.

We have a choice in politics and it is fairly binary: at whatever level and on whatever issue, we either choose to shape the world around us or we will be shaped by the world around us. I believe that the values we have in this House—certainly, the values we have as a party—and the conventions and traditions of this country are not something gathering dust on a shelf. They are a route map to the future. We have to believe in those values and be willing to defend them.

I hope the Secretary of State can give us enough concessions today to allow him to go away and think again about these issues. If he does not, I am afraid the Government will face an embarrassing vote today. As someone who is a former Secretary of State for Defence who sat on the National Security Council, it would give me no pleasure to vote against a Conservative Government because I believed they were undermining our national security. I urge the Secretary of State to go away and think about these issues, and bring them back in a way that provides satisfaction that our national security will not be sold for any reason whatever.

Mr David Davis: I have three very simple points to make. First, we are told that we should listen to the experts, namely the Government experts, but what is their argument? Their argument is this: the experts at our national security agencies, the greatest experts on this matter in the world, are wrong; the Australian Secret Intelligence personnel, who know China better than any other western agency, are wrong; and that the people in the Government of Japan, who are explicitly opposed to this policy and who are closest to China in terms of threat, are wrong. So if we listen to the experts, we should listen to the experts who are closest to this problem and who have the most resources, namely those or ours.

Bob Seely: I have talked with the NSC and GCHQ people a few times since last summer. One of the most disturbing things I found out, I found out yesterday. I said, “You are making a pledge that you can militate against the system”—we know from the oversight board that actually they cannot—“but for how long is that guaranteed?” I was told that the guarantee that we can defend the system lasts about seven years, which is about the same length of time as a car warrantee—not 10 years, not 20 years, not three or four generations, but seven years.

Mr David Davis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, but I suspect that seven years is a massive overestimate. Like our telephones, this technology changes every 18 months. Seven years is the achievement of an Einstein of this sector. That is point No. 1: our expert argument in the UK is that we are the only ones in step. That is not an argument that stands up very often.

My second point, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) referred earlier, is that this is a national security issue. The most recent debates on national security in this House in the past decade or so have been about terrorism, rather than potential massive conflicts between major powers. The House will remember that the IRA always used to say that we have to be lucky all the time, but they had to be lucky only once. That is a demonstration of the sort of analysis we must apply to security issues. Let us consider the Government’s argument. Let us imagine that the Government are right and we are wrong, but we do what we want to do. The worst case is that we spend a little more money and we introduce a technology, possibly better technology, maybe a year or two later. That is the worst-case outcome for our analysis. But if we are right and they are wrong, and we do what they say, the outcome will be to allow the undermining of our complete national infrastructure. This is not just a telecoms system; it is fundamental to the lifeblood of our entire national infrastructure. On a security analysis approach, it is just plum wrong.

Finally—this is designed to help the Secretary of State—there is the argument about time. I confess that I probably take the hardest line in our group on timing. My view is simple: we should separate this into two pieces. One is what happens about new installations. In my view, since they are called high-risk vendors—the clue is in the name—there should be no more installations. I can see no loss in not installing another single piece of Huawei equipment. The argument that it cannot be done by anybody else has been proven by several speakers so far to be completely without foundation. My argument to the Secretary of State is that when he stands up, he must tell us whether his proposal involves continuing to put in place Huawei kit that we will then have to take out in our move to zero. On that basis, I am afraid it is very clear that the Back Benchers are right and the Government are wrong.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden): Connectivity is the lifeblood of any modern digital economy. It is vital if we are to create the conditions where anyone can succeed and thrive, regardless of their background or their postcode. The Bill is crucial if we are to deliver that. It is one of a number of steps that the Government are taking to increase connectivity speeds, reduce costs and create the

[*Oliver Dowden*]

right environment to encourage investment. The Bill is a crucial plank in delivering the manifesto commitments, on which we on the Conservative Benches stood and were elected three months ago, to deliver broadband to the whole of the UK and to support the levelling up agenda. However, I have concerns that some of the amendments would undermine that work. They could mean the UK risks losing out on the economic benefits of nationwide access to faster broadband networks and that many families living in blocks of flats would not be able to benefit from new broadband services.

It has been clear from the debate so far that there is one principal amendment at stake, amendment 1, in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). Amendments 4 and 5, which I will deal with together, relate to high-risk vendors. The first point I would like to make is that I genuinely understand concerns, which many hon. Members have raised with me, that they have not had the time to consider these issues or to scrutinise them properly. The reason for that is that we will be bringing forward a Bill—as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) said, my first task as Secretary of State is to convince the House on the approach to high-risk vendors—on telecoms security, which will enable the House to consider all these points. We will bring forward that legislation before the summer recess, so all hon. Members will be able to debate these points extensively. There will be opportunities for amendments to be made and an opportunity for the whole House to consider all these issues at great length. I will proceed to set out the steps that have led us to this point and the further steps that we are announcing today.

Dr Fox: Will the Minister give way?

2.30 pm

Oliver Dowden: If my right hon. Friend will allow me to set out those steps, I assure him that I will take as many interventions as he wishes me to.

We looked at this issue over many months and in great technical detail through our telecoms supply chain review. This review was informed by technical and security analysis undertaken by GCHQ's National Cyber Security Centre. It was the most detailed study of what is needed to protect 5G, anywhere in the world. The recommendations from the review will substantially improve the security and resilience of the UK's telecoms networks, which are a critical part of our national infrastructure.

The Government's decision on high-risk vendors remains. As we have said, we are clear-eyed about the challenges posed by Huawei. That is why the National Security Council has decided that high-risk vendors should be excluded from sensitive and critical parts of networks and that there should be a strict 35% cap on the market share in the rest of the network—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Oliver Dowden: I assure hon. Gentlemen that I will give way if they allow me to proceed a little more, because I want to set out the context, which may address some of the points that they intend to raise.

We will of course keep the 35% cap under review and, over time, our intention is to reduce our reliance on high-risk vendors as the process of market diversification takes place. We want to get to a position where we do not have to use high-risk vendors in our telecoms networks at all, but to do that, we have to work with our Five Eyes and other partners to develop new supply chain capacity in our critical national infrastructure. I can tell the House that we will do that in this Parliament.

We are not in a position today to set out a specific date or timetable for reaching no high-risk vendors. That would require a new decision to be taken by the National Security Council, but we will continue to engage with hon. Members over the weeks ahead.

Mr David Davis: Will the Minister give way on that exact point?

Oliver Dowden: I will make a final point and then I will give way to Members. Hon. Members will have the opportunity to discuss controls on high-risk vendors when the Government bring forward legislation. I confirm that we will do that before the summer and that there will be an opportunity for colleagues to engage fully on how and when the commitments will be implemented. That will include the National Cyber Security Centre ensuring—exceptionally—that it will give evidence to parliamentary Committees, in addition to the Intelligence and Security Committee.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Oliver Dowden: It would be fair to give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green first.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. Let me bring him back to the Government's position. Is it correct, and does he agree, that the position of Her Majesty's Government is now to move towards no involvement—I repeat: no involvement—of high-risk vendors in our system and that that, in the five-year period that he is talking about, will be the purpose of what they engage in?

Oliver Dowden: I think we are all in agreement—certainly on the Government side of the House, and I believe that many Opposition Members also agree—that in an ideal world, there will be no need for any high-risk vendors at all. However, what we have to do, as a first step to getting to that point and within this Parliament, is ensure that we have developed the supply chain capacity. The point has been made by many right hon. and hon. Members that there is a lack of capacity on the supply side at the moment. That is why we are making this very strong commitment—by the way, this relates to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis)—which will involve considerable expenditure by the Government to ensure that we work with our Five Eyes and other partners to develop new supply chain capacity in our political and national infrastructure in this Parliament, so that we can then commence the process of ensuring that we move away from high-risk vendors.

Mr David Davis: Point No. 1: there is unavailable capacity—well, Ericsson says that that is not true. It said that at Davos earlier this year and Samsung says

that it is not true, but if we want proof of that, the Australians, who denied Huawei, already have 5G operations in Sydney and Melbourne being put together and the fastest 5G operations in the world exist already in America. There is not the shortage that the Minister claims.

Oliver Dowden: I understand the point that my right hon. Friend is making, but I hope that he would accept that at the moment, aside from Huawei, there is Ericsson and Nokia, which we are currently reliant on, and we need to enhance that capacity. That is why the Government are committing today to ensuring that within this Parliament, we work with our Five Eyes and other partners to ensure that we develop the extra capacity.

Dr Fox: My right hon. Friend said that a change in the decision by the National Security Council would be required. In fact, it would require a change in the decision by the Government. The NSC does not govern the United Kingdom—Her Majesty's Government do. However, I still cannot understand the idea of our having to remove high-risk vendors—we should not be incorporating risk to our national security into 5G at all. That capacity will emerge. The United States will not build a 5G network that incorporates that risk. What is the rush?

Oliver Dowden: My right hon. Friend raised two points. First, he referenced the role of the National Security Council. As he will be aware, that was created when he served as Defence Secretary under the former Prime Minister, David Cameron. It is a committee of the Cabinet. That is how decisions are made on behalf of the Government. The Cabinet delegates decisions to the National Security Council. That is the Government's decision-making process and, of course, it is endorsed by the Cabinet. Forgive me, his second point was on—

Dr Fox: The incorporation of risk.

Oliver Dowden: The National Security Council looked at that. The National Cyber Security Centre advised on it, working with GCHQ. We took that analysis of the risk. That was then assessed by Ministers through the National Security Council, who weighed up that risk. The Government took the decision that we should have a cap of 35% for high-risk vendors—principally, Huawei—and we would then seek to diversify and reduce that. We are clear in that commitment: we want to diversify away from Huawei. What we are setting out today is the process for achieving that, and that is, first of all, about ensuring that we get the capacity there in the first place.

John Redwood: Why is there no sense of urgency about getting the alternative capacity in? This is not a unique technology to the Chinese company. These are potentially massive orders. Put it out to bidding and see what is out there.

Oliver Dowden: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. There is a huge sense of urgency in this. That is why we are committed to working with our Five Eyes partners to make sure that, for the first time, we set out a timetable to say that within this Parliament, we will get the capacity, so that we can then ensure that we will start to move away from our reliance on high-risk

vendors. It is already capped at 35%. We want to get to a position where we do not need to rely on them at all. This is the important first step and it is about assuring the House that we are on the path towards diversification.

Mr Paterson: I very much welcome the Bill coming up and the commitment to move. However, the commitment to having no high-risk vendors so that we do not have to use them at all is where we are today. No company has to use this equipment, but they are forced to by the imperative that they will be undercut if they do not. The Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), who wound up the debate last week, said that

“we will work to move towards no involvement of high-risk vendors.”—[*Official Report*, 4 March 2020; Vol. 672, c. 299WH.]

Can we not just have a commitment that that is the destination to which we will move? That will send a massive signal out to our allies and customers and it will encourage the Five Eyes alliance to work together, all of which we know will take time, but there has to be a clear commitment to zero.

Oliver Dowden: We are clear in our commitment to diversification. That is the path by which we get to that point and those are the steps we are setting out today.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his commitment that as well as the ISC—I would love to know when it will be re-formed—scrutiny in this space will be given to Select Committees; I am a member of the Select Committee that scrutinises his work. But there is clearly an impasse here and a problem. My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) says there are other suppliers in the market that can do this now. The Secretary of State is talking about diversification in the supply side of the industry. I do not understand—where is the difference between those two positions? Can it be done now without Huawei, or not? Which is the truthful position?

Oliver Dowden: Of course it can be done now without Huawei, but what we have set out is, first, the cap, at 35%, and then the process of diversification to get from that point—

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend allow me?

Oliver Dowden: I will allow one more intervention, but then I should make some progress.

Mr Wragg: Could my right hon. Friend kindly explain the rationale behind 35%? Why not a per cent. more or a per cent. less?

Oliver Dowden: The rationale, as decided by the National Security Council, on advice from the agencies, was that that was a sustainable point—a cap from which we could start to work down. As my hon. Friend well knows, of course, there is a degree of arbitrariness in any number, but on balance it was decided that 35% was the appropriate place for us to land.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Oliver Dowden: I will give way one more time, but then I must proceed.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am trying to help my right hon. Friend, believe it or not. I understood from the discussions that our position was clear. I accept that the engagement of the Five Eyes is a new position. I congratulate them on that. But critical to that is that the point of our engagement will start with, as the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), said, moving towards no involvement of high-risk vendors. If we start by having diversification, we have no position for our Five Eyes partners. But if our purpose is to get this right for no involvement, I want the Secretary of State to say that now. If I do not get that—others can do as they like here—it will be my purpose to press the amendment to a vote.

Oliver Dowden: When the telecoms security Bill comes forward, we will have the opportunity to have exactly this kind of debate. This is an amendment to a Bill that is about ensuring that we get broadband into blocks of flats. I completely appreciate why my right hon. Friend and others have chosen to table the amendment. The concerns of hon. and right hon. Members have been clearly heard and understood. This can be dealt with in the telecoms security Bill, but ahead of that, in recognition of those concerns, we have already set out a pathway. First, we have made clear our intention to reduce our reliance on high-risk vendors as that diversification takes place. That gives further clarity to the House about the diversification process set out in the announcement from the National Security Council. Further, we have said we want to get to the position where we do not have to use them at all, which gives a sense of the clear endpoint and trajectory. But we are saying that in order to get from point A to point B we need to develop capacity, which is why we have said we will work with Five Eyes and other partners to develop this new supply chain capacity in our critical national infrastructure. Beyond all that, I recognise that this gives rise to tremendous questions about the basis on which the National Cyber Security Centre reached its decision. That is why for the first time we are saying that Committees other than the ISC will have a chance to scrutinise and hold it to account for that decision.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Oliver Dowden: I really feel that at this point I need to make a little more progress and deal with some of the other amendments, because I can see that you are concerned, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will happily take further interventions later on, though I feel I have dealt with a wide scope of them.

Chi Onwurah *rose—*

Oliver Dowden: Yes, I will give way, as it is the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson.

Chi Onwurah: This is clearly a question of great importance, yet unfortunately I hear nothing new. The Secretary of State seems to be committing to diversification, but what is the new commitment? Is it diversification of the supply chain, which was in the review, or is it diversification of the supply chain leading to the elimination of high-risk vendors, and if so by what date?

2.45 pm

Oliver Dowden: We have made at least three new commitments today. First, we will bring back the telecoms security Bill by the summer, which will enable the House—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady repeatedly challenged me over when the Bill would be brought back. We have said when we will bring it back for the House to debate. In the announcement from the National Security Council—from the Government—we said we wanted to diversify away from the 35% cap over time. For the first time, we are now setting out the process by which we will work with our Five Eyes and other partners to develop the new supply chain capacity to enable us to do that, and we have set a timetable for doing it within this Parliament. Finally, we have also said for the first time that we will allow much greater scrutiny by allowing the National Cyber Security Centre to—

Bob Seely: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Oliver Dowden: I will.

Bob Seely: I understand that the Secretary of State and his Front-Bench team are trying to make sense of a bad situation, but he is not saying what point B is. He says we will “diversify away”. Are we doing that because it will give us a bit more leverage with China, or are we diversifying to the point of 0% high-risk vendors, and if so by what date?

Oliver Dowden: The Government—I think we all share this objective—would like to get to the point where we do not need any high-risk vendors at all, and we are setting out that process. That said, I want to be candid with hon. Members: I am not today repeating the words of the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), lest they be misunderstood. We are not today setting out a timetable or date to get to a point where we do not have to rely upon them at all. When we introduce the telecoms security Bill before the summer, hon. Members will have the opportunity to debate this further.

I will make a little more progress and turn my attention to amendment 2. The issue of who is able to request a service from an operator is something that we were conscious of when we were drafting the Bill. As drafted, the Bill, particularly the term “lessee in occupation”, refers to a person who occupies a property under the terms of a lease. For the avoidance of any doubt, this could include assured shorthold tenancy or assured tenancy agreements. It is these types of tenancy agreements that I believe the shadow Minister is seeking to ensure are captured by the Bill, so we will not be supporting that amendment. My concern is that to expand the definition of persons who can make the service request would be disproportionate and potentially undermine a key policy aim of the Bill, which is for operators and landowners to reach agreements between themselves.

The Bill also reflects the fact that the evidence we have received does not suggest that the policy needs to be expanded. I am sure Members will agree that this is a sensible approach that maintains a healthy balance between all parties involved. I hope this clarifies who is likely to be a lessee in occupation and that this satisfies the shadow Minister.

I turn now to my concerns about amendment 3. The Bill aims to support leaseholders to gain access to broadband services from the providers they want. As drafted, the Bill already ensures leaseholders are not locked into services provided by a single provider. Nothing in the Bill prevents a lessee in occupation with an existing gigabit-capable connection from requesting a new service from another alternative provider. That alternative provider will need to give notices to the landowner in line with the electronic communications code. Should that landowner repeatedly fail to respond, that provider could apply for a part 4A order of its own in order to deliver that service. The Government cannot and should not compel independent, commercial companies to alter the way they choose to deliver their services unless there is evidence that a problem exists. Furthermore, far from improving competition and access to services, the amendment might have the unintended consequence of doing the complete opposite. Much of the cost of connecting premises is in the initial installation.

Finally, let me deal with amendment 6. The new connections provided by operators as a result of the Bill will allow greater efficiency and connectivity for consumers and give them an opportunity to benefit fully from certain services including “smart” or internet-connected products, which are often described as the internet of things. The amendment proposes that any operator exercising a part 4A code right must supply provide written information to new customers in the target premises. That would cover best practice on cyber-security in the use of the network connections that have been provided.

I appreciate the sentiment behind amendment 6, and the Government are committed to ensuring that the UK is one of the safest places to be online, but the amendment would impose an additional and disproportionate burden on operators, who may not be best placed to provide consumers with up-to-date information.

The Government have ambitious plans for the roll-out of greater connectivity throughout the United Kingdom, and I can assure the House that in doing so we will never compromise the safety and security of our telecoms networks. Trust in these networks is vital if we are to encourage the take-up of new technologies that will transform our lives for the better.

I have talked at great length to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green and others about our proposals and their amendments. I understand their genuine concerns about the decision taken by the National Security Council and the Government, which was presented to the House about a month ago. I hope that I have given them some comfort, although I accept that it is not all that they have been seeking. I hope I have at least reassured them that the Government appreciate their concerns, and that we are embarking on a path towards the ideal point that we all want to reach where we will have no high-risk vendors. I also hope that they in turn will appreciate that this is not the end of the process but an opportunity for their concerns to be expressed in the amendment, and that the substantial debate will come when we introduce the telecoms security Bill.

Ahead of that, for several weeks—indeed, a few months—there will be the opportunity for intensive engagement in all these issues, including full access to, and scrutiny of, the National Cyber Security Centre

and its representatives. I hope that that will enable the House to make progress, but when the Bill is introduced there will of course be huge opportunities for all Members to table appropriate amendments, and the Government will address each one of them.

Steve Brine: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Oliver Dowden: I will take one last intervention, but then I really must stop.

Steve Brine: This has been a good discussion, although heated. I do not think that this is the right Bill for the amendment, so I will not be supporting it. My right hon. Friend has mentioned the telecoms security Bill. Will it come before the relevant Select Committee and the aforementioned Intelligence and Security Committee for pre-legislative scrutiny, or will it be introduced in the House first?

Oliver Dowden: The convention is that representatives of the NCSC appear only before the ISC, but when I spoke to the NCSC’s director this morning, I suggested—and he agreed—that he should appear before any appropriate Committee, such as, perhaps, the Defence or the Foreign Affairs Committee. We will seek maximum engagement before that, so that the Committee can have all the relevant information.

I have made my points about the Government’s position, and about the opportunity to debate these issues again. I do not know whether I have convinced my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green, but I hope that he will consider withdrawing his amendment and allowing the House to discuss his proposal in due course when the telecoms security Bill is introduced, before the summer recess.

John Nicolson: I support amendment 1. I think that the Secretary of State took eight or nine interventions, and I was interested in his language. As a journalist, I know that when politicians talk about “moving towards”, it means that there is no end in sight, and that “like to” means “perhaps, but I am not going to give any commitment of any kind”. We could sense the feeling of disappointment on the Conservative Benches.

The Secretary of State said that he would never compromise safety and security, and then went on to detail all the ways in which he was compromising the nation’s safety and security. Huawei is not a normal company. Huawei is an arm of the Chinese state, which is exactly why our fellow members of Five Eyes are so frustrated by the Government’s behaviour. We are also being told repeatedly that only a certain percentage of the nation’s infrastructure will be surrendered, but, as I said in my intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), that suggests a misunderstanding of the whole nature of 5G.

I apologise for my hoarseness, Madam Deputy Speaker. Please excuse me while I drink the water with which I have been provided. I always think it is terribly unfair that Labour Front Benchers are given glasses while we are forced to rely on plastic—that is yet another example of anti-Scottish discrimination in this place—but I thank the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah).

[John Nicolson]

The distinction in 5G between core and edge collapses. There is no distinction: that is the point. It is meaningless twaddle to keep talking as if 5G were no different from current technology. I recognise, of course, that the Government are between a rock and a hard place, facing a decision between spiralling costs and high security, but here in the UK we have spent, and continue to spend, billions of pounds on the development, maintenance and renewal of 20th-century defence systems that simply are not fit to face the security challenges of the modern era. Those who pose the biggest threats that we now face—terrorism, climate change and, of course, cyber-attacks—will not be deterred by multi-billion-pound nuclear missiles in the Firth of Forth.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I have listened attentively to the views that have been expressed during this important debate. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important for us to get the legislation right, and to think very carefully about this issue? Should we not also consider the importance of generating a supply chain within the UK, given that we have many excellent employers in both British-domiciled and overseas companies, which are adding a great deal to the country's economy and which could be developed further?

John Nicolson: I certainly do agree with the hon. Gentleman: I think that he is absolutely right. One of the peculiarities of the Government's position, from our perspective, is that they are prepared to invest billions in fighting 20th-century battles—renewing Trident, for instance—while opening their arms to 21st-century threats to cyber-security. As the hon. Gentleman suggests, countering those threats would require serious investment in and protection of native companies, which would involve a long, hard look at China's enthusiasm for the acquisition of small engineering companies that have valuable intellectual property in this country.

I support the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), and I will vote for it if there is a Division. I think that I should now cut my time short, as I am beginning to sound like a 1930s jazz singer. I know that the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central is very keen on those.

John Redwood: I support my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and my other right hon. and hon. Friends, who have made a strong and cogent case based on national security. As they have argued, there are some absolutes in national security. There are occasions when a risk is such that whatever the commercial or other considerations might be, it is important for that to be put first.

However, I wish to add to their argument. I do not think the commercial and economic situation in the medium term is any different from the national security situation. Indeed, I argue in defence matters and these wider matters that our country cannot say it is secure if it does not have control of the crucial technologies it may need to defend itself and protect itself. Nor can we say that our country is secure—an island trading nation—if we are dependent on countries and suppliers in other

parts of the world who may in some future disagreement or, heaven forbid, some conflict no longer be willing to supply us.

3 pm

It is most important that we have control of that technology with our allies, and that we have the ability to make and to scale up manufacture, should the need arise, if the diplomatic situation around the world worsens. This is just such a situation. These are crucial technologies. These are technologies that people based in the United Kingdom who accept our system and have allegiance to our democracy are quite capable of developing and producing. They are already being produced by people in similar countries with similar purposes and systems who believe in democracy and the international WTO-policed world trading system and who are willing to trade with us in the meantime. I urge the Government—keen as they rightly are on a levelling-up agenda to spread prosperity more widely around the country and keen as they rightly are to get the most out of our new status as an independent country—to understand that our wider national security rests not just on the specific issues of intelligence and the flow of data but on our capability as a nation to control and exploit crucial technologies and our ability, with our strong and confirmed allies, to have that productive capability, come what may.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman rightly refers to our national security being dependent on our allies. Some of our best allies are old friends such as Australia and New Zealand. Surely it is deplorable that any move we make could damage that relationship.

John Redwood: I agree. I have supported my right hon. and hon. Friends and I have not wished to bore the House by repeating all their excellent arguments, but of course the fact that the United States of America, Canada, New Zealand and Australia are all of one view does matter. I happen to think they are right, but even if they are wrong, sometimes we have to go along with wrong thoughts by our allies and friends—I know that only too well, trying to live in the Conservative party—in order to make things work. There has to be give and take, and I am sure that any other political party with an honest MP would agree that it has exactly the same issues. Before Labour Members get too conceited, I have to say that I have noticed even more extreme issues in the Labour party. It is important that there is give and take.

I happen to think our allies are right, but I want to stress the wider point that in this vision of a more prosperous Britain, we are going to have more skilled people. That must mean we have a bigger role to play in the technologies of today and tomorrow, and those are surely the crucially important digital and data communications technologies. I repeat my challenge to the Minister. We have heard from people who know about these things that this technology already exists among our allies and in safe countries today, so we have an opportunity to buy from them.

The Government and the commercial sector in the United Kingdom are about to commit enormous resource into putting 5G into our country. This is going to be a massive investment programme, and in this situation,

money talks. I have no idea who will win the competitions. I do not have preferred vendors that I want to win the competitions, but I do know that I do not want high-risk vendors winning them. Surely this new Government, wanting to level up and wanting to strengthen technology and training, can use this commercial money and state money to better effect. Let us bring forth those providers now and get rid of those high-risk providers as soon as possible.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I think we all share some concerns that the Government seemed to be more amenable to moving their position last week than they are this week. At the end of the debate last week, the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), who kindly responded to us, said that

“we will work to move towards no involvement of high-risk vendors”—[*Official Report*, 4 March 2020; Vol. 672, c. 299WH.] in our system. I am unsure whether the Secretary of State has said the same thing today, and we would all be grateful if he clarified whether that statement made by the Minister is still a live statement or whether he is effectively rowing back from what the Minister said.

I speak in favour of the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) because I believe that high-risk vendors should not be in our critical national infrastructure. This is for reasons of national security, which have been eloquently put, as well as for a whole host of other reasons, including human rights, data privacy, the rule of law and economic competition—a critical one just mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood).

One of the most concerning elements of this entire sorry saga has been the litany of questionable claims. One of the problems of being a new Member—I speak in part to the good people behind me—is that we want to trust Ministers and although I hold these Ministers in high regard, I believe they have unfortunately been handed a poisoned chalice. There has been a great deal of misinformation in the past—none of which they are responsible for—but it is worth putting this on record with as many sources as possible, so that we can be absolutely clear what the argument is about.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green talked about Huawei being a private firm, because that is one of the claims that it has made. Sir Andrew Cahn described Huawei as being

“the John Lewis of China”,

and, frankly, I treat that description with the derision it deserves. The academic Chris Balding has made a study of the ownership structure of Huawei, and he has stated:

“Technically, the firm known as Huawei is Huawei Technologies. Huawei Technologies is 99% owned by Huawei Investment Holdings.”

He went on to say that Huawei Investment Holdings was a vehicle of the Chinese trade unions. Chinese trade unions are a public or mass organisation. Public organisations do not have shareholders. An example of a public organisation in China is the Communist Youth League. So, despite the laughable claims in this country and elsewhere that Huawei is a private company—and it is trying to sue people in France who are claiming the

same thing, let it be known—Huawei has the same relationship to the Chinese state as the Communist Youth League.

Can Huawei be safely limited to the periphery of 5G networks? The core versus periphery argument has been well laid out by Opposition Members. The Australian Signals Directorate says that

“the distinction between core and edge collapses in 5G networks. That means that a potential threat anywhere in the network will be a threat to the whole network.”

I have been talking to Dr Ian Levy and other good, knowledgeable people from the NCSC. They dispute some of this, and they try to provide technical analysis, while that is not correct. I note what the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo says, on the advice of the National Security Agency. He says:

“Because 5G networks are largely software-defined, updates pushed to the network by the manufacturer can radically change how they operate.”

So if a network is run by an untrusted vendor, that vendor can change what the network can do quite easily using software updates.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I absolutely understand my hon. Friend's concerns. My concern, though, is that we have made promises to this nation in the last general election about the need to improve our gigabit broadband, so how are we going to do that?

Bob Seely: The simple answer is that 5G and broadband are entirely different subjects, but I thank my hon. Friend for her question.

We have asked questions about state or industrial espionage issues with Huawei. We have been offered a no-spy agreement by Huawei and China. They promised not to spy on us. The idea that we would ever ask Ericsson for a no-spy agreement is nonsense. What would Ericsson ever want to know? How much IKEA furniture we were buying? So the idea of having to ask for a no-spy agreement is in itself rather dubious.

China has a dreadful reputation for IP theft and cyber-attacks. Just last month, members of the Chinese Liberation Army were indicted in the United States for the Equifax consumer credit hack, in which the personal details of 12.3 million Britons were stolen in addition to those of tens of millions of Americans. In 2015, cyber-attackers from China stole the sensitive personal data of 21.5 million US federal employees. Perhaps they are doing that because they want to buy everyone a birthday present, but somehow I doubt it.

There have been specific scandals in relation to Huawei. The African Union reported that every night between 2012 and 2017, computer systems installed by Huawei sent information from the African Union headquarters to China. As Secretary of State Pompeo says:

“As a matter of Chinese law, the Chinese government can...demand access to data flowing through Huawei...systems.”

Nobody has ever denied that that includes Huawei systems in western states and the United Kingdom. Is there a security risk? Is there an industrial espionage risk? The answer, without doubt, is yes.

The Government repeatedly reassure us that the spooks say it is okay. I respectfully take issue with that, for the following reasons. The proof of the pudding is in the detail, and what politicians say about what they have been told is sometimes not the case.

Andrew Bridgen: My hon. Friend has obviously done a great deal of research on this subject. Does the fact that Huawei is offering very generous interest-free credit terms for its equipment set alarm bells ringing? In some cases, it is offering up to 30 years' interest-free credit for its kit.

Bob Seely: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Huawei seems to have two business models. It either undercuts by 30% to 40%, or it simply supplies 115% of the credit needed to buy an entire system. Either way, it undercuts and drives others out of business. I look forward to addressing that point in a moment.

The true voice of GCHQ, without the spin, is found in the Huawei oversight reports, which have become increasingly disturbing. I repeat: we hear the true voice of GCHQ not in the words of Ministers, but in those of the Huawei oversight board. For any colleagues who wish to access the details, if they join our WhatsApp group, which has well over 40 members, I will happily pass them on.

The board found that it could

“only provide limited assurance that all risks to UK national security from Huawei's involvement in the UK's critical networks can be sufficiently mitigated”

over time. In other words, the board is saying, “We can no longer give assurance.” This is the board speaking—it is not political spin. It added that, “as reported in 2018”, its work

“has continued to identify concerning issues in Huawei's approach to software development...No material progress has been made on the issues raised in the previous 2018 report”.

It also stated:

“The Oversight Board advises that it will be difficult to appropriately risk-manage future products in the context of UK deployments, until the underlying defects in Huawei's software engineering and” —

critically—

“cyber security processes are remediated.

At present, the Oversight Board has not yet seen anything to give it confidence in Huawei's capacity to successfully complete the elements of its transformation programme”.

If I received that as a bill of health, I would be extremely worried. That is the true voice of GCHQ.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a very important point. A lot of this is about trust: who do we trust? Given that the oversight board has identified cyber-security risks in Huawei's system and that it has no credible plan to put them right, why should we trust such an organisation and give it yet more work?

Bob Seely: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. If Huawei was bending over backwards to fix its system, all credit to it—but it is not doing that. It is building a flawed system. After eight years, I have been informed that we still do not know whether the source codes that Huawei gives us are the same as those in the system it is establishing. That should cause concern.

Are the security services content? In the report we wrote last summer, Sir Richard Dearlove said that it was “deeply worrying” and

“a risk...we simply do not need to take”.

There are three additional factors that I am concerned about. First, Cheltenham was given a very narrow remit. It was not asked to give Huawei a clean bill of health or, “What do you think in a perfect world?” Cheltenham was given a specific, narrow, technical question. It did not go near the politics of fair and free trade and espionage. Secondly, and probably most worrying—

3.15 pm

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): If broadband and 5G are separate, why is this amendment being pushed today? This debate is about broadband and we stood on commitments made by the Prime Minister during the election.

Bob Seely: That is a very good question and I thank my hon. Friend for asking it. The simple answer is that I have been asking for a Government debate since last summer, but unfortunately they have not seen it fit to have a debate in Government time on one of the most critical issues that we will face in coming decades. My hon. Friend will have to ask the Government why they do not want a debate in Government time on one of the most important issues of the day.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very good case. Does not this come down to two main points? First, do we trust the assurances given by a company that clearly will do what the Chinese Government tell it to do, or do we pay heed to the warnings of four of our major allies, which have taken the decision not to go down this route? Secondly, in such an important infrastructure project, where else would we accept a cut-price offer from a company in a nation that has littered the coasts of east Africa with infrastructure projects that have failed? We do not even know whether this will work properly, and the cost of picking up the bill—of picking up the pieces—when it goes wrong could be huge.

Bob Seely: I thank my hon. Friend for his considerable eloquence. He sums up the issue very well.

On my second, and most revealing, security concern, when we ask members of GCHQ or the NSCS how long the guarantee is for—will it last 20, 30 or 40 years?—the answer is seven years. The oversight report has already stated that Huawei cannot provide a guarantee, but, technically speaking, the assurance accompanying the Huawei kit lasts the same amount of time as a car warranty. This technology will define the next 20, 30, 40 and 50 years, and GCHQ says, “We think we've got it covered for about seven.”

Thirdly, as I have said, the true voice of GCHQ is in the oversight reports. I am sorry to spend time on that point, but it is important because so many colleagues will be influenced by those saying, “Oh, GCHQ says it's okay.” If they read between the lines and read the oversight report, they will see that this is not okay.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): My hon. Friend makes the point about the seven-year cycle. If this goes ahead, are we committing ourselves to Huawei being the dominant force in this industry? We have had 3G and 4G, we are now on to 5G, and there will doubtless be 6G and 7G in time to come, but there will be no western ability to advance this software in the future because Huawei, through cut-price credit deals, will have crowded out the competition in perpetuity. That has to be dangerous.

Bob Seely: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point, which I will come to. Does Huawei enable a multiplayer market? No, it does not. It probably destroys a multiplayer market, for the reasons given.

Huawei is becoming the vehicle by which China, through peaceful means, seeks to have considerable leverage in the critical national infrastructure of not only the United Kingdom but any other western nations that are foolish and unwise enough to agree to let in a “high-risk vendor”, to use the Government’s own definition. In the next 10 to 20 years, the remaining western players will be put out of business, and, as my hon. Friend says, our 6G and 7G will be dependent on a country that we do not know we can trust and whose economic players are, by our own Government’s definition, “high-risk vendors”.

Huawei’s credit line is to the tune of \$100 billion—that sounds a bit like Austin Powers. It can simply undercut anything that anybody else offers, to aggressively stay in the market. That, combined with its intense lobbying operation in this country, including John Suffolk, Andrew Cahn and others, puts it at an advantage to drive other people out of business.

Are there alternatives? Yes. Orange in France is building a 5G network with Ericsson and Nokia. In this country, O₂ does not yet use Huawei. If the Secretary of State would be interested in saying anything on the emergency services network, we would be very interested in hearing that, because we do not think that the emergency services network should have a high-risk vendor in it. The US, Vietnam, South Korea, Japan and Australia are planning or building 5G networks.

Why has all this happened? This sorry state was reported in Sir Malcolm Rifkind’s Intelligence and Security Committee report in 2013. He found a miserable set of circumstances in which Government officials or civil servants had allowed Huawei into the system without telling Ministers. When Ministers found out that Huawei was in the system, they did not do anything about it. That, combined with an extensive lobbying operation and cut-price deals, has driven Huawei into its position in the market now.

What should we do? Well, let us have a debate—I hope that this is the beginning of one—as Australia and other countries have. I believe that, working with our Five Eyes and other partners—NATO and the European Union—we should lead. There is an opportunity now for the Secretary of State and Ministers to lead on this debate and to agree a common formula for a trusted vendor status, so we know that the people in our system are competent and safe. My right hon. and hon. Friends have made various points about the wider issue of the cleanliness of that—primary contractors are one thing, but if they are buying kit from China, the question is whether that is compromised, and it may well be. We need to find a way to organise the security of our audit process for 5G. We also have to agree a trusted vendor status when it comes to the Bill that will be put before us in June, and I look forward very much to the Government doing so.

Mr Paterson: I shall be brief. I begin by thanking the Secretary of State and the Under-Secretary for their great courtesy and the huge attention they have given to several of us to try to find a resolution, because unfortunately some of us find the Government’s position incomprehensible.

They had a good narrative: they could have said, “We have inherited a very bad position from preceding Conservative and Labour Governments. We would like to reduce the current position, where we have a high-risk vendor implanted in our 4G and other networks, to zero over a period of time.” That would be a perfectly logical plan, and we are tantalisingly close to the Government saying that. They have acknowledged that Huawei is high risk. Having a limit of 35% is a bit of a nonsense: it is like saying prisoners are allowed to build 35% of a prison wall. If 35% is a risk, and we cannot go above 35%, the obvious, ineluctable conclusion is that we should go to zero over a period of time.

We know that the talk of lack of alternatives is a nonsense—we have been through this. We know Samsung is supplying Korea; we know France has gone for others; the United States has gone for Ericsson; and Australia, with a huge dependence on Chinese exports, has gone for other vendors. We know there are other vendors, so that is all a nonsense.

We know there is a real risk. It is worth looking at the National Cyber Security Centre report. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) quoted two lines from paragraph 5.5.2. I just want to quote one sentence:

“Any national dependence on a high risk vendor would present a significant national security risk.”

Having had the honour of serving on the National Security Council as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, I know that we must take that as the absolute first priority. I take the House back to the words of the Under-Secretary last week. He made it very clear:

“I conclude by saying simply that national security will always be at the top of our priorities and we will work to move towards no involvement of high-risk vendors.”—[*Official Report*, 4 March 2020; Vol. 672, c. 299WH.]

That was the Government’s position last week, and I am happy to support that position. What we need to have today is confirmation of how we get there.

The Secretary of State has moved a long way since the National Security Council. We will have a telecoms Bill in early summer. We will have a process with our Five Eyes partners, as proposed by the senators’ letter, which we all received last week. That is all thoroughly good stuff. All we need now is a commitment to say there will be an end date. We have to have from this debate a statement from the Government that there will be a point, in the reasonably near future, where there will be zero involvement of high-risk vendors. The briefing we had sent round to us this afternoon said that “our intention is to further reduce the market share of high risk vendors so that we get to a position where we do not have to use a high risk vendor in our telecoms network.”

The Secretary of State said that we wanted to be in a position where we do not have to use them at all, but that is where we are this afternoon. Nobody has to use this equipment: they are just driven to do so by commercial pressures, and it is only by doing what the United States, Australia, Japan and South Korea have done, which is to block and stop high-risk vendors, that we will allow other vendors to grow, to prosper and to supply.

I am delighted to see the Under-Secretary back in his seat and talking to the Secretary of State. They have time still to intervene on me and give a clear commitment that when the telecoms Bill comes through in the summer,

[Mr Paterson]

it will contain a definitive commitment to a firm date by which all high-risk vendors will have been removed from our system.

Chi Onwurah: I am afraid that the Secretary of State's so-called assurances have sown more confusion, rather than rectifying the situation. He says the Bill should include tenants, but he also said in the same speech that it would be disproportionate to extend the Bill to do so. I will therefore press amendment 2.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 242, Noes 343.

Division No. 39]

[3.26 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bardell, Hannah
Barker, Paula
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul
Bonnar, Steven
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Cadbury, Ruth
Callaghan, Amy
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Stella (*Proxy vote cast by Peter Kyle*)
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Daby, Janet

Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies-Jones, Alex
Day, Martyn
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doogan, Dave
Dorans, Allan
Doughty, Stephen
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Farry, Stephen
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Fletcher, Colleen
Flynn, Stephen
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanvey, Neale
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew

Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Rachel
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Mishra, Navendu
Monaghan, Carol
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Mr Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Murray, James
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nichols, Charlotte
Nicolson, John
Norris, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan

Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Kate Osamor*)
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pollard, Luke
Qureshi, Yasmin
Reed, Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie (*Proxy vote cast by Bambos Charalambous*)
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Alyn
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Richard
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Webbe, Claudia
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Whitley, Mick
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Munira
Winter, Beth
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jeff Smith and
Thangam Debonaie

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Ahmad Khan, Imran
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Amess, Sir David
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, Kemi (*Proxy vote cast by Leo Docherty*)
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Berry, rh Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, rh Conor
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot

Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinanage, Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Kate
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan

Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Mrs Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Robert Courts*)
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie

May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Russell, Dean
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David

Smith, Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, rh Rishi
Sunderland, James
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Trott, Laura
Truss, rh Elizabeth

Tugendhat, Tom
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Villiers, rh Theresa
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Sir Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Wallis, Dr Jamie
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Wild, James
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
David Rutley and
Iain Stewart

Creasy, Stella (*Proxy vote cast by Peter Kyle*)
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Daby, Janet
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Dr James
Davies-Jones, Alex
Davis, rh Mr David
Day, Martyn
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doogan, Dave
Dorans, Allan
Doughty, Stephen
Drax, Richard
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Farry, Stephen
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Fletcher, Colleen
Flynn, Stephen
Fovargue, Yvonne
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, James
Gray, Neil
Green, rh Damian
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanna, Claire
Hanvey, Neale
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera

Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Rachel
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Darren
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mangnall, Anthony
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Esther
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Mishra, Navendu
Monaghan, Carol
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Mr Stephen
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian

Question accordingly negated.

Amendment proposed: 1, in clause 1, page 2, line 16, at end insert—

“(f) the operator does not, after 31 December 2022, use vendors defined by the National Cyber Security Centre as high-risk vendors.”—(*Sir Iain Duncan Smith.*)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 282, Noes 306.

Division No. 40]

[3.40 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bardell, Hannah
Barker, Paula
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Bob
Blackman, Kirsty
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul
Bonnar, Steven
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Brennan, Kevin
Bridgen, Andrew
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan

Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bruce, Fiona
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Cadbury, Ruth
Callaghan, Amy
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Chope, Sir Christopher
Collins, Damian
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil

Murray, James
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Nandy, Lisa
Neill, Sir Robert
Newlands, Gavin
Nichols, Charlotte
Nicolson, John
Norris, Alex
Offord, Dr Matthew
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Kate Osamor*)
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Percy, Andrew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pollard, Luke
Qureshi, Yasmin
Redwood, rh John
Reed, Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie (*Proxy vote cast by Bambos Charalambous*)
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rosindell, Andrew
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Alyn
Smith, Cat
Smith, Henry
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Syms, Sir Robert
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Richard
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Tugendhat, Tom
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Warburton, David
Webbe, Claudia
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Whitley, Mick
Whittome, Nadia
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Munira
Winter, Beth
Wishart, Pete
Wragg, Mr William
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Bob Seely and
Craig Mackinlay

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Ahmad Khan, Imran
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Kemi (*Proxy vote cast by Leo Docherty*)
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott
Berry, rh Jake
Bhatti, Saqib
Blunt, Crispin
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Braverman, rh Suella
Brereton, Jack
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Brokenshire, rh James
Browne, Anthony
Buchan, Felicity

Buckland, rh Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, rh Conor
Butler, Rob
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carter, Andy
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Clarke, Theo
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Cleverly, rh James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, rh Oliver
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Kate
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenkyns, Mrs Andrea
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Fay
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, Gillian
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Robert Courts*)

Lord, Mr Jonathan
Mackrory, Cherilyn
Macleane, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, rh Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, James
Morrisey, Joy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Randall, Tom
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Richards, Nicola
Richardson, Angela
Roberts, Rob
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Ross, Douglas
Russell, Dean
Sambrook, Gary
Saxby, Selaine
Selous, Andrew

Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, rh Alok
Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, rh Rishi
Sunderland, James
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Trott, Laura
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Villiers, rh Theresa
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Sir Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Wallis, Dr Jamie
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wild, James
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Jeremy
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Iain Stewart and
David Rutley

Question accordingly negated.

Third Reading

3.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Today we have had an important debate on an important Bill. The Government have heard loud and clear the points made in all parts of the House. As we move towards the telecoms security Bill, we will engage intensively with colleagues across the House to make sure that we make our case at every possible level, and we will underline the fact that we will always put national security at the very top of our agenda.

Although this is a short and technical Bill, it is an important one. Fast, reliable, resilient broadband connections are the lifeblood of our economy and our society, and ensuring that every home and business can access these connections is a priority for this Government. It is vital if we are to create the conditions where anyone can succeed and thrive, regardless of their background or their postcode, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said. The Bill sends a clear message that this must be a priority for landowners because fast reliable broadband is good for their residents. Connectivity can create thriving technology scenes in rural areas. It can enable closer relationships for the socially isolated. It can open people up to a world of inspiration and education.

This Bill demonstrates that this Government are serious about doing what it is necessary to do to ensure that everyone, wherever they live, is part of a levelled-up United Kingdom. It shows that the Government will create an environment that promotes investment and encourages deployment, and will not shy away from making the changes necessary to ensure that every household can access the connectivity they need from the provider they want.

This is a vital Bill that is critical to the success of our digital economy in the decades ahead. I thank Members from across the House for the scrutiny that they have provided today and for raising all the points that they have raised. The Government will, as I say, continue to engage intensively with those concerns. We will bring forward the telecoms security Bill before the summer recess. In advance of that, we will provide all the information that we possibly can. I commend the Bill to the House.

3.58 pm

Chi Onwurah: We have had a very interesting and at times lively debate. On Third Reading, I would say that this Bill gives us baby steps towards rolling out the infrastructure that so many millions across this country are in desperate need of—full-fibre broadband infrastructure. This is no time for the Government to be patting themselves on the back. This is a mediocre Bill that, in addition, risks being derailed by the Government's failure to take a longer-term view on our national networks, full-fibre, 5G and more. In terms of the Secretary of State's responses, we will take forward the reassurances on tenants and hold the Government to account. Tenants should be able to access the provisions of this legislation. I fear that the Government do not understand the basis or need for competitive infrastructure, because the Bill does not support competitive access to multiple-dwelling units. We will hold the Government to account on that. We will also hold them to account on the assurances given on information and better dissemination of digital skills and digital guidance.

The big Huawei hole in which the Government find themselves has not been reconciled by today's debate. The Secretary of State promised several things,

including a new telecoms security Bill, but he could not give us any of the details. He promised a diversification strategy but, to be clear, that was the basis of the telecoms supply chain review report in July 2019, and we would hope that there would be some detail on what that strategy is. The Budget is tomorrow. Will we see funding for significant investment in the diversification of the supply chain that the Secretary of State promised?

Will we get greater clarity on what the diversification strategy is leading to? Is it leading to non-dependence on high-risk vendors within this Parliament or at some unspecified date in the future? We have heard little on the industrial strategy that will make diversification possible. Are we talking about UK capacity to deliver 5G and 6G in future networks, or are we talking about greater support for Japanese and Korean companies to enter our supply chain? Will the timetable for this diversification strategy be on the face of the telecoms security Bill?

Those questions all remain to be answered. It is an indictment of this Government's support for our national security—and the clarity of that support for our national security—that at this stage so many Conservative Members feel it necessary to vote against their own Government, in order to press home the needs of our national security and, specifically, our technological capability in the key areas of 5G, 6G and future telecommunications. We are told that, in network design, it is always important to design in the possibility of breach, but the Government seem to be designing in breach of our entire network system.

Matt Warman indicated dissent.

Chi Onwurah: The Minister shakes his head. In that case, I hope he will be able to say how we will ensure that we are not dependent on high-risk vendors before the end of this Parliament. Until we see a detailed plan, an industrial strategy and funding for all the different components of that, the Opposition will remain concerned that the Government are not prepared to make the interventions necessary to ensure that our national security is safeguarded.

4.3 pm

Ronnie Cowan: As this Bill crawls forward, what could have been a UK-wide success risks becoming a fragmented and divisive Bill. An opportunity for the UK Government to engage with the devolved powers

and build something to a gold standard—something that could have been seen across the world as a path forward—has been ignored. This Government have clearly learned nothing from their Brexit failures.

The SNP Scottish Government recognise that the geography of Scotland—with, for example, 94 permanently inhabited islands—and the spread of our population require specific solutions to provide world-class digital infrastructure. Despite telecommunications being a reserved matter, the SNP Scottish Government continue to set higher targets and provide additional funding. Currently, the SNP Scottish Government have committed £600 million to rolling out superfast broadband. They continue to strive for 100% access to superfast broadband, which they define as 30 megabits per second—the EU standard—as opposed to the UK's definition of 24 megabits per second.

As we try to move forward with this Bill, I would ask that we look at the unique geography and the other obstacles that are hindering the roll-out. These should be considered by the UK Government when allocating their funds to specific regions and nations of the United Kingdom.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I pause in case there are any further contributions. No? What an incredibly efficiently short debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. A statement was made by the SNP spokesman about Scottish Government investment. I thought it was important to correct the record. Much of that funding comes from the UK Government and the Scottish Government very rarely meet their targets, despite the fact they like to talk about them a lot.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his “point of order”—I am putting that in inverted commas—but he knows that it is not a point of order for the Chair. However, he has made his point, and I perceive that it has been noted by those to whom he wished to make it.

Backbench Business

Lesbian, Bisexual and Trans Women's Health Inequalities

4.6 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered lesbian, bisexual and trans women's health inequalities.

It is a pleasure to move the motion and to speak in this very important debate on lesbian, bisexual and transgender women's health in the week we have been observing for considering such issues. The aim of the LBT Women's Health Week is to raise awareness about lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer women's health inequalities, to make it easier for service providers to empower service users and to make it easier for communities to support LGBTQ women.

Up front, I will declare an interest as a lesbian, who also suffers from anxiety and other mental health issues. I know that my own experiences have taught me a huge amount. In recent months and years of reflection since I came out in 2015, I have had a little bit of time, despite the political storms we have lived through in recent years, to reflect on some of the reasons why it took me so long to come out.

I am very grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, and to the many charities and organisations that operate in the LGBTQ space that have provided briefings for today, as well as our healthcare professionals—I know we will discuss them today, but we must pay tribute to them—and to the Women and Equalities Committee and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, which have done much work and produced reports that many of us will draw on. I know some controversial issues will be discussed today, but I am certain that we will hold this debate and have our discussions with respect and integrity.

I also want to thank the many folk who contacted me after I put a shout-out on social media asking for lesbian, bisexual and transgender women's experiences of health inequality. I am sure that everybody in this House will agree on the ills of social media, but I also hope we can agree that there are times when it can be incredibly positive and constructive as a tool to help us engage. At a time when this Parliament and the politics of this place can seem very far from folks' lives, I have appreciated the ability to reach out to the public via Twitter and other social media channels, and I will shortly share some of the experiences that members of the public have shared with me on this issue. I know that some of them were very painful and very difficult to relive and to recount.

There are many facets to the debate on the healthcare of LGBTQ people and women in the LGBTQ community, and the fact that there is a specific week to raise awareness when there are so many other issues going on is really helpful. The Science and Technology Committee report states that there is

“emerging evidence demonstrates that lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT+) people experience significant health inequalities across their lifespan, often starting at a young age.”

I came out literally as I was being elected, initially to myself, then later to my family and friends and publicly

sometime after that, and that was challenging. It is fair to say that the impact on my mental health was profound. As most of us who have been here since 2015 will know, there was not exactly time to process any personal challenges or issues. But my experience of coming out publicly was hugely positive. Social media played a part in that, such as taking part in a photograph of LGBTQ MPs and peers, which then went online and attracted much attention; that showed the solidarity not just in this place and at the time in the other place for LGBTQ politicians, but across wider society. It was hugely positive, but I am also very conscious that I had an incredibly supportive network of family and friends, and that I have a very privileged position; in many ways I came out with the cover of political privilege. That is something that very few other people across the UK and beyond have, and we must always remember the challenges that folk across the UK and beyond face in coming out and those in the many countries where it is still illegal and people are persecuted for being LGBTQ.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does the hon. Lady feel that at this time we should include in our thoughts those lesbian, bi and trans women who are asylum seekers and have been asked by this Government to prove that?

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely agree with that. There are a number of stories in the press at the moment about LGBTQ asylum seekers that are hugely concerning, and I would like to think that, given the distance we have travelled, this Government will review their processes and policies and look very carefully at the treatment of LGBTQ asylum seekers. I have met a number of them myself, and some incredibly important work is ongoing, but the stories that we are reading in the press and the experiences that we are hearing of LGBTQ asylum seekers are deeply troubling, and I absolutely agree with what the hon. Lady said.

On coming out later in life, I discovered recently that middle age is classified as being between 30 and 50. I have to say that that was a shocking discovery.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): It is middle youth.

Hannah Bardell: I agree with that.

For me, and for many other people, in coming out later in life there is an element of regret, and in fact mourning, for a life not lived as my authentic self, and it is hard to describe what that feels like. I try very hard to look forward—to make the most of what is in front of me, not to look back and have regrets that I was not living my life as my true self. There are many reasons why people come out later in life, and there is also much research around the profound impact that that has on people's mental and physical health.

Coming out as lesbian, gay or bisexual can be a very different experience from coming out as trans. I cannot imagine how incredibly difficult that is, particularly in the current climate. We owe it to our trans and non-binary citizens to support them and ensure that discussion around changes in legislation or any matters relating to their lives and healthcare is conducted in a respectful and decent way. Sadly, I think we can all agree that there have been times recently when that has not happened.

John Nicolson: Does my hon. Friend agree that while it now seems socially unacceptable to express anti-gay thoughts and feelings, by contrast we appear to be having an open season on trans people, which is deplorable. Does she also agree that that must be deeply disturbing for young trans people who are trying to come to terms with who they are?

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely agree. Technical details of legislation and the concerns that people may have can and should be discussed, but they have to be discussed in a respectful way. As my hon. Friend says, there is open season on trans people. We could literally cut and paste some of the rhetoric that was used against lesbian, gay and bi people the '70s and '80s. That it is now being used against trans people is just utterly deplorable. We must do everything we can to protect trans and non-binary people's rights and their mental health.

We know the LGBT community, including lesbian, bi and trans women, experience significant health inequalities and specific barriers to services and support. Stonewall Scotland's survey of LGBT people in Scotland found that half had experienced depression in the past year, including seven in 10 trans people, and that more than half of trans people have thought of taking their own life in the past year. Let us just reflect on that. Half of trans people have thought of taking their own life in the past year. So when we think about and reflect on the debate that is currently ongoing, we must look at that statistic and take it very, very seriously.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The hon. Lady refers to half of trans people. Can she put a figure on that? I would like to know, because that is terribly sad.

Hannah Bardell: The statistic in the Stonewall Scotland report is 52%. That is specific to Scotland. I do not have the exact number, but I am very happy to get it and to share it with the hon. Gentleman. It is a significant number.

One in six LGBT people have deliberately harmed themselves in the past year. One in four LGBT people have witnessed discriminatory or negative remarks against LGBT people by healthcare staff. One in eight LGBT people have received unequal treatment in the healthcare system because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Almost two in five trans people have avoided healthcare treatments for fear of discrimination. One in four LGBT people have experienced healthcare staff having a lack of understanding of specific lesbian, gay and bi health needs, and nearly three in five trans people have experienced healthcare staff having a lack of understanding of specific trans health needs.

I understand that some of these matters are very technical. They are challenging and they require a level of expertise. That is why education, open discussion and proper resourcing in Scotland and across the UK is absolutely vital. We know how incredibly hard staff in the NHS work in all countries and parts of the UK. We salute them. However, the studies show that there is a bit more work to be done. I want to share some of the experiences that a number of lesbian, bisexual and trans women have been kind enough to contact me and offer. Their very personal experiences and perspectives are invaluable. It is right that today in this debate we give them a voice.

One trans woman who transitioned a number of decades ago in another country, but who now lives in the UK, contacted me with her experience. She says:

"Almost all of my medical appointments have been for general medical issues. The only time I have seen anyone in the GIDS"—

Gender Identity Development Service—

"pathway was once when I had a consultation with a surgeon...regarding a long-term consequence of the particular type of gender reassignment surgery I had, which was satisfactorily resolved."

She mentioned issues with access to drugs, but that was not necessarily about her being trans; it was about two health boards in England not speaking to each other, and it was resolved. She said that all these appointments were handled in a very courteous, respectful and professional manner. "However," she says,

"I suspect the combination of my age, the length of time since my transition, and especially my professional status may have afforded me a certain degree of privilege. I'm not certain others, particularly younger transwomen or those who are just beginning transition, would necessarily have the same experience."

Interestingly, she says, although all of her doctors have been aware of her transgender status, as it affects some aspects of her medical care, no doctor has ever inquired about her sexuality or whether she is sexually active.

It may be useful to know that she is a registered clinical and forensic psychologist, a long-time member of the World Professional Association For Transgender Health, an affiliate member of the British Association of Gender Identity Specialists, and a member of the editorial board of the *International Journal of Transgender Health*. She has been a full-time faculty member at many universities and is, by all accounts, an expert in her field.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) just passed me a note with some of the numbers. To go back to the point made by the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), there are up to half a million trans people in the UK, according to the Government Equalities Office. If we break that down in terms of the percentage of Scotland's population, a significant number of people are being affected and are considering taking their own lives, so the seriousness of that is very important. I thank my hon. Friend for that wee bit of information.

The woman who got in touch with me advises that she was recently offered a position as a psychologist at a specialist clinic in the UK. That is good news, given her expertise, but there are a number of reasons why she declined the position. In her own words:

"The most important reason why I declined the position, however, was the horrendous amount of transphobia currently rampant in the UK, spurred on by what seems to be an ever-growing number of highly inaccurate, one-sided, or genuinely bigoted and hateful articles and columns in the press...I felt that to be a trans woman working within the GIDS would place me directly on the firing line for a barrage of hatred and abuse—something which, honestly, I was not willing to endure."

Those are the words of someone who is highly professional with specialist training, who I imagine that the NHS would have been hugely fortunate to have. That is the lived experience of a trans woman in our society, and it should give us all pause for thought and reflection.

The reality of the services not being properly or fully funded was highlighted to me by another person who contacted me. They raised the issue of the very long waiting list to access the gender identity development service. They explained that there is

“very long (2+ years) between referral and first appointment, leaving hundreds of children and adolescents in distress for extended periods. The UK government promised an inquiry into the massive increase of referrals, but it appears to have vanished. These”

young people

“are in desperate need of better care but are being ignored. GIDS say that they should be treated under Child and adolescent mental health services (known as CAMHS) in the interim, but for the most part CAMHS won't touch them once gender identity issues are mentioned.”

They advised me that they

“are lucky enough to be able to afford private therapy”

but that the

“the children's GIDS service is failing and should form part of your debate.”

I hope that the Minister will consider those matters and perhaps update not only the Chamber but me in writing, so that I can share it with the person who got in touch with me.

On gender recognition legislation and why it is needed, I was struck by a contribution by Time for Inclusive Education, which created a podcast called TIE Talks, which is well worth a listen. Mridul Wadhwa, a trans woman of colour who lives and works in Scotland, recently spoke alongside Sharon Cowan, professor of feminist and queer legal studies from Edinburgh on the podcast. They spoke compellingly about the Gender Recognition Act 2004 and the impact of the current system on the mental and physical health of trans people. I urge people to listen to it because it is hugely informative. I pay tribute to Jordan Daly and Liam Stevenson, who founded TIE, and the chair, Rhiannon Spear; they do remarkable work in Scotland for young people around LGBT education.

Mridul spoke about the patriarchal nature of the gender recognition panel and how a group of anonymous people decide other people's future and fate in a way that echoes and has parallels, in her view, with the immigration system, which she has direct experience of. I was interested in hearing more about that and had a discussion with her about the differences and parallels of coming out as trans versus coming out as lesbian, gay or bi. She came out and transitioned in a different country, but she was clear that there are inherent similarities. I certainly remember people saying to me when I came out, “You can look forward to coming out every day.” I have to say, that is still pretty true nearly five years on, but what she told me was that as a trans person, there are so many hurdles to overcome. At times, she feels:

“how many people do I need to convince that I'm a man or a woman?”

I cannot imagine what it is like for someone to have to justify their very existence repeatedly. It must be exhausting and take a huge toll—as we saw from the statistics—on their mental and physical health. Back in 2013, a study in the US said, unsurprisingly, that legalising gay marriage might improve health and reduce healthcare costs. Another similar study last year found that legalising equal marriage could improve the mental health of same-sex couples. Wow—what a revelation! You can marry the person you

love and live the life you want as the person you are, and it might actually make you happy and reduce the burden on the healthcare system.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): On behalf of the people of Northern Ireland, I want to thank every single Member who did the work that could not be done in Northern Ireland to ensure that our brothers and sisters were entitled to full equality where they had been denied it for far too long. One of the groups at the forefront of that campaign and of our work in particular with lesbian and bisexual women in Northern Ireland was HERE NI, but it is about to have its funding cut. Does the hon. Member agree that that cannot be allowed to happen and that the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Executive have to do everything in their power to protect that vital service? One of the key things it does is look after the mental health of lesbian people in Northern Ireland. It cannot be allowed to happen.

Hannah Bardell: I agree with everything the hon. Member said. I was proud to vote for equal marriage in Northern Ireland and for abortion reform. I will not lie: it was a strange position to be in. I abstained several times to give Stormont the opportunity to get back up and running, but I was always clear that if it did not, and that if people there wanted it to happen, there would be no other option, so I was very proud to support that legislation and to see that happen. I pay tribute, as he does, to the many people who fought hard to make it happen. The thought that funding would be pulled is hugely concerning, so I agree with everything he said on that front.

We know that legislative change does not in itself necessarily change culture or fix the problem, but it is an important step. We all remember section 28—section 2A in Scotland—and how hugely damaging those discriminatory pieces of legislation were to LGBT people, not just then but now. I saw someone online recently ask how, because one of my colleagues had not even been born when that legislation came into force, it could possibly have affected her. What an outrageous and ridiculous thing to suggest. I did not have to fight for the equality I now have, but I certainly felt the effects of the discrimination that the legislation left behind, as have and do many people.

We are only now getting the inclusive education we should have had when that legislation was repealed in Scotland and across the UK. In Scotland, we are working with TIE, the Equality Network, Stonewall, the Scottish Trans Alliance and other organisations. TIE has been at the forefront of making sure that our Government in Scotland roll out inclusive education. I started school the year that that legislation came into force, and it was hugely damaging. The UK Government have also said that they are rolling out inclusive education, and I hope they stay true to that commitment, because we have to be resolved and determined to make those changes happen.

Such inclusive education is not necessarily about the details of sex of LGBT people; it is just about teaching children and young people that LGBT people exist, that some people have two mums, some people have two dads, some people have one mum, some people have one dad, some people have a mum and a dad, some people are brought up by kinship carers or grandparents.

Family makeup across the UK is, and has been for many years, very varied, and we should welcome and celebrate that.

I know from my own experience that healthcare appointments can throw up unexpected issues. For many people, a smear can be a difficult and distressing thing, but for most people it will be fairly straightforward. At this point, I wish to mention the My Body Back clinic, an LGBT-inclusive clinic that provides specialist services for survivors of rape, domestic abuse and sexual violence.

A number of years ago, I went to my local service for one of my first smears after coming out. The nurse, wrongly assuming that I was heterosexual, asked what contraception I used. When I explained, "Well, for a start I am a lesbian", her eyebrows went up and she looked a bit awkward. She said, "Oh, well, you will not need any then", and brushed over the matter. That, unfortunately, was a wrong assumption, because lesbian and bi people do need and should be considering protection during sex.

I am going to go into some detail, which I hope will not make anyone feel too awkward. If it does, perhaps that should prompt the question of why it makes people feel awkward, and perhaps it demonstrates how important it is to discuss these issues. They are really important issues, but they are not widely discussed. Safe sex for lesbians and bi and trans people, and indeed non-binary people, is very important, particularly when it involves oral sex and the sharing of sex toys, and if you or your partner have had, or have, or suspect you have, a sexually transmitted infection or disease.

It seems that, sadly, the nurse who saw me was not apprised of those matters, but it is important for us to remember that we still live in a very hetero-normative society, and that it is not just heterosexual couples who need to ensure that they use protection against pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. That includes washing and the sterilisation of sex toys, but also the use of items such as dental dams. For the benefit of those who may be less well educated and not know what a dental dam is, let me explain. It acts as a barrier to prevent sexually transmitted infections from passing from one person to another. It sounds like something that would be used when people are having their teeth polished, and it was originally made for dentistry purposes and used to protect the mouth when dental work was being done, so that is not too far from the truth. However, it is now used as protection during lesbian or bi sex. Thinner versions were apparently later produced specifically for promoting safe oral sex.

I do not know whether anyone has ever tried to buy a dental dam, but they are nowhere near as readily available as condoms. In fact, they often have to be ordered via the internet. I do not want to put anyone off, but they are also not particularly nice or attractive things to use. It is interesting to note the huge innovation and investment that has been put into the development of condoms over the years—for instance, to make them thinner for maximum pleasure. They can also be ribbed, dented or flavoured. Dental dams do not come in quite the same range, for, I would imagine, a variety of reasons. The manufacturers and the marketers have not even seen fit to rename them. I think that that is an important point, and one that is little discussed.

We know how much women's bodies are affected by contraception and the toxins that many of us put into our bodies, be they from the implant, the pill or the coil.

I have been discussing that with one of my colleagues. So much of our sexual health is centred on heterosexual male pleasure, with heterosexual or bi women bearing the brunt of the responsibility for contraception.

"There is a common misconception that oral sex is 'safe'", explains Simone Taylor, the education and regional lead at Brook, a sexual health charity for young people.

"But while you can't get pregnant from oral sex, you can still catch STIs."

In 2008, Stonewall published the results of a study of the health of 6,000 lesbian and bisexual women, which revealed that half of those who had been screened had an STI, and a quarter of those with STIs had only had sex with women in the last five years. It is very important for us to take account of those issues.

I have only a few more points to make. I know that a number of other Members want to speak. The specific health needs of disabled people who are also LGBT are often overlooked by healthcare professionals. According to Stonewall, which has produced some compelling briefings on the subject, disabled people in the LGBT community can be left with a lack of trust in their healthcare providers. Multiple needs are often not taken into account, which affects some of the most vulnerable people. LGBT people are not necessarily open about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity when seeking medical help, because of a fear of unfair treatment and invasive questioning.

Stonewall goes on to talk specifically about issues around personal independence payment assessments and it has said that one in five non-binary people and LGBT disabled people have experienced discrimination. Similarly, one in five black, Asian and minority ethnic LGBT people, including 24% of Asian LGBT people, have experienced it. One of the testimonies it offers is from someone who was going through the PIP assessment. They said:

"I held out my hand to shake and the nurse didn't look at myself or my wife after I introduced who she was and no eye contact throughout the interview. We felt we wanted to leave."

Someone else who shared a testimony said:

"An NHS nurse asked about my recent gender reassignment surgery and then went on to compare me to being a paedophile as if being trans is the same thing."

That testimony, from somebody in the east of England, was taken from Stonewall's website and I have to say that it is hugely concerning. This reinforces the point about LGBT education and why it is so incredibly important that the misinformation that is out there and being used against trans people should be busted.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The hon. Lady is giving an incredibly powerful and informative speech. I have certainly learned a lot up to this point and I thank her for that. The point about intersectionality is incredibly important, and the point she makes about how important it is that sex and relationships education is delivered in schools is well made. Does she agree that it is also time to remove the exemption that allows some families to remove their children, particularly in primary schools, from age-appropriate relationship education? Headteachers who have to deliver this tell me that this is a big barrier and puts them up against their parent bodies. We need to make that stop, and help people to help themselves.

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. We know that it is sometimes the most vulnerable children who are being taken out of schools who need that relationship education. That is causing huge issues. As we know, there are many LGBT young people who are suffering profoundly for various reasons, whether it is their parents taking them out of school or the schools not yet providing that education. My own sex education in high school was literally about putting a condom on a banana and a quick discussion about the pill, and that was it. It is frightful to think that that is what children were being taught, and we have come a long way, but there is still a long way to go.

The work that Time for Inclusive Education—TIE—and Pink Saltire are doing in Scotland is hugely important. In 2019, TIE delivered 41 education sessions across Scotland, and found that 85% of the pupils it worked with who had previously held negative views or had a negative attitude towards LGBT peers reported that their opinions had changed positively after TIE had delivered a session. I have seen and been involved with some of the materials that TIE has produced. Its work is not just around sexuality; it is also around harmful gender stereotypes, which have a hugely negative impact. The learning outcomes highlighted that all the young people involved had an improved understanding of challenging those stereotypes, being true to themselves and speaking up if they were struggling. The testimonies that TIE shared with me included an S1 pupil saying that they had learned

“to never bottle anything up and to speak to someone about problems”.

Another said they had learned that

“no matter how bad things are it can get better if you try”.

Another had learned that

“it’s ok to ask for help...that you shouldn’t be afraid of who you are”.

Another had learned

“that it’s ok to be a bi girl and that things will get better”.

Another had learned that

“it is fine to be LGBTQ+ and as a lesbian I felt a lot better about myself after this”.

A poster created by pupils in Primary 7 read:

“Girls can play football, we’re all equal!”

I could not agree with that more.

In closing, I just want to say how grateful I was to Members of this place, to the Speaker and to the House authorities when I recently suffered homophobic abuse—that is the only way to describe it—from a Member of the other place. I named him at the time, and I am not going to name him again, but it had a profound impact on my mental health. I also want to mention the support that I have had from the police. That was the first time I had ever experienced that kind of discrimination in my workplace. We all know that there are workplaces across the UK where LGBT people are facing discrimination, but to have experienced it in such an acute way, with a Member of the House of Lords saying homophobic things about me in the press, is still something that I find utterly incredible. There is not very much I can say about it, because the matter is ongoing, but I do want to say how grateful I am to the Members of all political parties who supported and contacted me, and to the public. The Member in question is a former MP from Northern Ireland who now sits as a life peer in the

House of Lords. I received a number of emails from people in the Northern Ireland LGBT community, telling me about the damage he had done to their community over many decades. I did not know who he was before I came across him.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I appreciate the hon. Member’s shock and revulsion at the comments that were made. May I stress that they are very much unrepresentative of Northern Ireland today? My hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) and I are putting forward a different face of Northern Ireland for these types of debates. As the hon. Member has indicated, many people in Northern Ireland have suffered and been at the brunt of similar comments in the past, including from that Member, but I hope we are turning the page.

Hannah Bardell: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, and I could not agree more. I have a deep affection for, and many friends in, Northern Ireland. I have spent a lot of time there. I got emails from people saying, “We’re so sorry. This person doesn’t represent us.” I knew that, but none the less I was heartbroken to hear of the profound impact that this individual has had on the LGBT community in Northern Ireland.

Putting that to one side, I am glad that we are having this debate. I hope all Members will agree that there is still a long way to go and that debates such as this one are part of the picture of making sure that good and proper healthcare is available for everybody in the LGBT community. We as Members must do everything we can to make sure that no one suffers from poor mental or physical health just because of their gender, sexuality or gender identity. We are all equal. At the end of the day, we are all human.

4.42 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): May I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) on securing this debate? I am very pleased, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on global LGBT+ rights, to support her wholeheartedly. She has made some excellent points. Obviously, her personal testimony is immensely powerful, and her points about the trans issue were extremely well made. I had immediate sympathy with her comments on coming out with political privilege, which describes my own coming out in 2010.

The APPG on global LGBT+ rights is, at present, the only APPG organised in support of such rights. It focuses on global LGBT rights, where the position is very different from that in the United Kingdom. I thank the group’s administrator, Anna Robinson, for her help and the briefing she has afforded colleagues and me for this debate.

I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time in the Chamber to debate this important subject. This is the first time that lesbian, bisexual and trans women’s health inequalities have received a dedicated debate in this House. The issue was debated in the other place in 2014. This debate is timely because it is National Lesbian, Bisexual and Trans Women’s Health Week. The importance of what began as a civil society initiative was acknowledged in the Chamber last year by the then Minister for Women and Equalities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), who I am delighted to see in her place.

Let me try to put this issue in its context in the United Kingdom. This debate is taking place in a Parliament that has more out LGBT MPs than any other. This Parliament, over the past two decades, has gone from equalising the age of consent—which took it five years; I think we were both special advisers when the process began, Madam Deputy Speaker—and being coerced by the European Court of Human Rights to allow LGBT people to serve in the armed forces, to delivering adoption rights, civil partnerships and, finally, equal marriage. All those measures were taken with increasing enthusiasm by Parliament. The legal case for equality in the United Kingdom has been made. I think we can be proud of Parliament's leadership today in what a former Father of the House, the late Sir Peter Tapsell, who was elected in 1959, rightly described as the most profound social change of his lifetime.

The change has been very profound in my party. Sir Alan Duncan was the first Conservative MP to come out in 2002. Nick Herbert was the first successful out Conservative to be selected in 2005. Yet just 15 years later, the Conservative party now has the largest caucus of out LGBT MPs in Parliament. That change is perhaps reflected in the sensitivity and the priority the Government have given the issue since 2010. It is reflected in the really excellent "LGBT Action Plan 2018", authored by my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North, and a year later, the follow-up report. I have not heard it challenged that that is the most comprehensive plan of its kind in the world, and that sets the context for today's debate.

We have delivered equality in law, but we now need to deliver equality in outcome. Unequal health outcomes are perhaps the most concerning of all. We know that LGBT+ people of all genders still face inequalities when it comes to access to and the provision of health services. Last year, the Women and Equalities Committee, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), produced a groundbreaking report on health and social care and LGBT communities, which showed that unacceptable inequalities remain in the provision of health and social care services when it comes to the LGBT community. The report identified that deep inequalities exist in health outcomes for LGBT communities; that LGBT people are expected to fit into health systems that assume they are not LGBT, which has a significant impact on LGBT people's ability to access the services they require; and while the LGBT community does generally have the same health and social care needs as the rest of the population for the majority of the time, the Committee found that LGBT people do not in fact always receive the same level of service as non-LGBT people. The evidence gathered also illustrated that across many health areas such as smoking, alcohol abuse and even cancer, the LGBT population had poorer health outcomes. The report acknowledges that although few people set out to discriminate, lack of training and knowledge on LGBT communities, coupled with an assumption by many healthcare professionals that sexual orientation and gender identity are not relevant, result in services that are not fully LGBT inclusive.

This debate is about the very specific area of LBT women in particular, and we know that they face particular barriers because of their gender, and when women are older, have disabilities or belong to an ethnic or religious

minority, those barriers grow even larger. Those inequalities, as we have heard from the hon. Member for Livingston, take various forms. Lesbian, bisexual and trans women can often face discrimination and poor treatment when accessing general healthcare services. When they have experienced, or expect to experience, inappropriate questions, misgendering or homophobic, biphobic and transphobic comments, as well as ignorance of their health needs, such as incorrectly advising lesbian women they do not need smear tests, it can deter lesbian, bisexual and trans women from accessing healthcare when they need it. We also know that the waiting times for gender identity services, averaging a two to three-year wait, are simply too long. Research shows that LBT women experience higher rates of poor mental health, and yet they have significant difficulties in accessing mental health support.

There are other worrying statistics, such as that bi women are more than twice as likely to have cervical cancer as heterosexual women, and lesbian and bi women are more likely to describe themselves as having fair or poor health than heterosexual women. As the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists points out, those figures highlight something wrong in the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of those conditions.

In July 2018, the Government published their LGBT survey and action plan, which clearly identified the health disparities facing LGBT people and committed to ensuring that LGBT people's needs will be at the heart of the national health service. The survey was remarkable: 108,000 people participated, making it the largest survey of LGBT people in the world to date and thus an incredibly valuable resource to understand better the needs of the whole LGBT community.

It is encouraging to see the Government's focus on delivering some of the health-related commitments in the action plan, which I greatly welcome. The appointment of an LGBT advisory panel made up of representatives from the LGBT field is also a welcome action by the Government, as is the appointment of Dr Michael Brady as the first national adviser on LGBT health. The funding pilot on LGBT health is another initiative that I am sure Members on both sides of the House will welcome, but there is still a vast amount of work to do to close the gap. I will focus on some of the recommendations in the Select Committee report, particularly those relating to LBT women.

First and foremost, we must ensure that, where multiple initiatives, agencies, action plans, advisers and Departments are working on an issue, they do so in a co-ordinated manner to increase their effectiveness. In relation to LBT women's rights specifically, as well as those of the whole LGBT community, we must ensure that the Government Equalities Office, which has responsibility for the action plan, and the Department of Health and Social Care, which has oversight over the NHS long-term plan, collaborate to ensure that LGBT-inclusive healthcare is mainstreamed across the NHS England strategy and to ensure that its implementation is the responsibility of health and social care institutions, and not solely of the Government Equalities Office.

Those organisations need to ensure that data collection on both sexual orientation and trans status is introduced to prevent health disparities being hidden, and they need to ensure such data collection acknowledges that some women can be lesbian or bisexual and transsexual.

The Select Committee report recommends that sexual orientation monitoring should be made mandatory across the NHS, and that there should be a timeline for implementing mandatory monitoring on both sexual orientation and trans status, calling it

“far too important to be an aspiration rather than a concrete goal with clear timelines for delivery.”

I hope today's debate prompts the Minister to review plans for mandatory monitoring.

In addition, LGBT+ issues are routinely omitted from needs assessments and planning, resulting in a lack of necessary services for the LGBT community. That must change and, given the unique challenges faced by LBT women, special attention must be given to their unique needs. The solution should be simple: all commissioning outcomes frameworks should have the explicit requirement to consider the needs of the LGBT community, with specific consideration of LBT service users.

Equalities training for frontline staff must be improved and made mandatory to ensure high-quality and consistent delivery across all our services. That will empower health professionals to provide appropriate care so that LBT women are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve, as well as helping NHS and social care staff to identify discriminatory behaviour. Initiatives such as the NHS rainbow badge are a welcome start; it should be noted that it was started and continues to be run by individuals at trust level, not by NHS England, but there is clearly much more to do.

Professional registration bodies also have a role to play in developing training, as well as in making sure they include non-stereotypical examples of LBT women in their educational and training materials so that their students are aware of the specific needs of LBT women.

Finally, with a large task ahead, it is clear that Dr Brady's role as the national health adviser on LGBT health must continue, yet continued funding for his role has yet to be confirmed. The health adviser not only needs his position to continue but needs increased resources and authority to make the structural changes needed to improve LBT women's health, and I hope my hon. Friend the Minister can help make that happen.

Looking internationally, the UK has taken up the co-chairship, with Argentina, of the Equal Rights Coalition, an intergovernmental organisation that exists to protect the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people. As part of this role, and in upholding a commitment in the LGBT Action Plan, the UK Government will hold an international LGBT conference, which will present a unique opportunity to raise issues such as LBT women's health inequalities in an international sphere. I hope we will all be putting that event into our diaries. At the moment, it is due to sit on 27 to 29 May—coronavirus possibly puts it in some doubt, but we shall see.

In summary, progress has been made in this area, and in a context where the United Kingdom has been in a globally leading role. However, legal equality does not deliver practical equality on the ground. We must be more co-ordinated, and more effective in the collection of data and on training, and funding for initiatives needs to be made central and permanent until that inequality is addressed. LBT women's specific health and social care needs will not otherwise be adequately met. Much overdue improvement is happening in the area of women's

rights generally, and of course more needs to happen. Weeks such as LBT Women's Health Week are hugely important—I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North for recognising that—in order to ensure we do not lose focus on this issue. That is why I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the time in the main Chamber to debate it. With LBT women facing the double barrier of gender and sexuality in accessing healthcare, we must ensure that LBT women's health needs do not remain invisible.

4.56 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I wish to refer Members to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests regarding NHS services in this area. I am thankful we are having this debate today. I, too, thank the Backbench Business Committee for bringing it forward. It is particularly important for my city, which is home to the Porterbrook centre, which is a specialist gender identity clinic.

I want to highlight some of the health inequalities faced by trans people, but before I do I will flag up some of the more general issues in health and social care for the LGBT community. I could have spoken about mental health, access for women, particularly LGBT women, to drug and alcohol services or, as has been expressed by others, access to screening for the detection of cancer. Today, however, I shall focus primarily on social care because it is one area that will affect all LGBT families at some point.

I recommend that anyone with an interest in LGBT health inequalities take a look at a recent report by Stonewall called “Unhealthy Attitudes”. Rather than focus on health inequalities and disparities, it focuses on and investigates the culture in our health and social care system, and asks how inclusive it is for LGBT people.

Some of the report makes for shocking reading. The report details the discrimination and abuse that LGBT staff, patients and service users have encountered in the health and social care sector. The report is based on data collected from health and social care workers. One stark thing about it is that it does not shy away from quoting what the staff themselves say about LGBT patients and colleagues. Although there are a lot of positive comments, there are quite a lot that could be considered bigoted. It is a telling feature of the culture of an institution that this minority of staff feel comfortable expressing these bigoted views.

The report also features direct testimony from LGBT staff on their experience of bullying and discrimination, and from staff who would like to do more. In fact, 38% of social care workers agree that more needs to be done to tackle bullying and discrimination—interestingly, this is more than the figure for health workers, which is 31%. Importantly, it is also clear from the report that staff often feel disempowered to challenge homophobia, transphobia or biphobia when they see it. Sometimes, they also feel like managers will not support them if they are challenging the bigotry of a patient or service user—in fact, in one of the testimonies the person said that their manager was the main offender. For that reason, I wonder whether trade unions, and especially their LGBT sections, might be given more powers to intervene in workplaces to provide education and training.

Training is important. The recent House of Commons report on LGBT health inequalities talks about the systemic roots of injustice in the system, and that is manifested in a lack of training given to workers in the sector. One in four health and social care workers say that their employer has never provided them with any equality and diversity training, and the proportion increases to one third in privately funded services. It is often social care workers who feel least confident dealing with trans patients and service users: 34% of advice workers said that they are not confident, as did 31% of social workers and 24% of support workers. The report finds that one in 10 care and social workers feel unequipped to meet the needs of LGBT people.

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to ensure that the health and social care needs of the most marginalised and vulnerable LBT women are urgently addressed?

Olivia Blake: Absolutely—I completely agree. This is an urgent matter and the Government should take note and take action.

We need to put person-centred care front and centre. Fifty-seven per cent. of health and social care practitioners say that they do not consider sexual orientation to be relevant to someone's health needs. Among care workers, that proportion rises to a staggering 72%. This view probably comes from an admirable commitment to equality but, as the recent review of the Marmot report reminds us, equality is not the same as equity. A person-centred approach to healthcare should be holistic: it is about understanding how someone's personal life and background affects how they receive care and experience care settings, and how their experience of the health and social care system affects their health outcomes. Again, there is massive scope for training, and for unpicking a one-size-fits-all approach.

I wish particularly to mention trans people's experience of the health and social care system. As I said, Sheffield is home to the Porterbrook gender identity clinic, which is a regional provision. We need more resourcing for such clinics to bring down the long waiting times. We also have to look at the experience of trans women as they use the services. A recent Healthwatch Sheffield report explored the experience of trans people using healthcare services in my city. The participants in the report stressed that the care they had received at the Porterbrook centre was good, but they could not say the same about their interactions in other parts of the healthcare system. An issue that they flagged was understanding—understanding from staff about the rights and entitlements of trans service users, and sometimes more basic things, such as the use of correct pronouns. The participants also flagged up the reluctance of many providers and professionals to acknowledge non-binary gender identities.

There is a long way to go in addressing health injustices for LGBT people—and they should be called injustices. Equal treatment is not the same as equitable treatment. We need to acknowledge the specific life experiences that LGBT people have and how those experiences affect their interaction with the health and social care system. We also need to acknowledge the bullying and discrimination that LGBT staff and service users encounter and how that contributes to health inequalities through people's reluctance to engage with and use services when they have had, or fear, a bad experience.

We need to make sure that our health and social care system is properly resourced. The austerity agenda has been a key driver of the crisis in health and social care, which has hit LGBT people especially hard and hit women hardest, so there is a double impact for LBT women. Injustices are not natural; they are a product of choices. This is about not only NHS-funded services but the massive cuts to local authorities, particularly the cuts to public health grants, which fund services that LGBT communities rely on more than other communities. I hope the Government choose to end the injustice of LGBT healthcare inequality by properly investing in the resourcing and training that is necessary to build health and social care services that work for all our people, so that no one is afraid to access healthcare and everyone has an inclusive health and social care experience.

5.4 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank Members across the House for some very powerful speeches. It is always an invidious task to single out individual ones, but the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) spoke very powerfully when she opened the debate.

I have a declaration of interests of sorts to make. Before being elected to this place, I worked as an NHS doctor specialising in mental health. For almost eight months or so, I was an in-patient consultant looking after women with psychiatric problems and I looked after quite a few bisexual, trans and lesbian women. I went on to work as an HIV mental health specialist in south-east London, where, as Members will understand, these issues are relevant.

Today's debate highlights the importance of understanding and addressing health inequalities wherever they are. We must ensure that everyone has access to great opportunities, with a safety net when things do not go to plan. The health service and our public services in general are a key part of that. That means breaking down barriers to accessing those opportunities and services. I wish to focus a bit today on stigma, research and tailored services.

As we have heard today, LGBT health inequalities need to be addressed, but to do so we first need to understand why they exist. This debate focuses specifically on lesbian, bisexual and trans women's health inequalities, raising an important and often overlooked point about the LGBT community: the assumption that the LGBT community is one community with one set of needs. If we are to address inequalities, we must also understand complexity. We must tailor our services to support and reflect the communities in which we live. For example, many black, Asian and minority ethnic women face different cultural pressures from those of white Europeans, which can affect their ability or willingness to access services. With regard to the LGBT community, we must recognise “the minorities within the minority”.

On the recent report by the all-party group on HIV/AIDS, I am in a rather unusual position: I was a witness providing evidence for the report when I worked as a doctor and I went on to become an officer of the group, after I was elected. I do not know whether I am the first, but I would be interested to hear whether other people have had similar experiences in engaging with all-party groups. The report found that a key contributor to inequality is the stigma that many people still face.

Stigma ruins lives. Many communities still view sexual orientation and gender identity issues as shameful or dishonourable. More than 70 jurisdictions around the world still criminalise same-sex consensual relationships and fear of these views can prevent those who need help and support from seeking it. Those suffering from mental health problems also face stigma. When these issues overlap, people can feel increasingly marginalised and isolated. The point about intersectionality was well made by the hon. Member for Livingston. It is a crucial issue.

Mental health issues, in particular, disproportionately affect people who are more vulnerable, marginalised and suffer from socioeconomic deprivation, including LGBT communities. Although health inequalities among the LGBT community are well documented, they are not well researched or understood, especially the intersectionality element of that, which, as I say, is a huge issue. This lack of data perpetuates stereotypes. A good point was made about NHS stereotypes. The service that I used to work for submitted to the all-party group on HIV/AIDS concerns about anecdotal stories of NHS workers having awful stereotypes about people accessing their services. That is an area where we need to seek out, educate and transform. It is sad that that still exists.

Most of the research that does exist in this area is on men's health and it is predominantly focused on HIV and sexual health. Sexual inequality debates usually focus on sexual health and wellbeing, overlooking inequalities such as access to mental health services, drug and alcohol services and the like. For lesbian, bisexual and trans women, there is even less awareness and understanding. Inequalities for these women include pregnancy and reproductive health issues: for example, they are more likely to miss cervical screening, as has already been mentioned.

In order to fully understand LGBT health inequalities, we need more detailed clinical research and data. With improved understanding must also come improved tailoring of services. Multiple complicated issues, such as those experienced by the LGBT community, are often exacerbated by a lack of integrated care. Research published by Stonewall in 2018 found that 52% of LGBT people experienced depression. For lesbian, bisexual and trans women struggling with reproductive issues, the challenge is accessing both physical and mental health services in a clear and co-ordinated way.

The move towards sustainability and transformation partnerships in the NHS in 2015 was a step in the right direction. It is now vital that these partnerships develop into integrated care systems to deliver on the Government's NHS long-term plan. I congratulate the 14 areas in England that have already become—or are near to becoming—integrated care systems, including Surrey Heartlands health and care partnership, which looks after my constituency of Runnymede and Weybridge. However, I urge the Government to ensure that all sustainability and transformation partnerships meet the April 2021 deadline to become integrated care systems, so that all our residents can benefit from integrated services that operate in the community and are tailored for the communities they serve. These changes are an opportunity to break down barriers, and to provide a comprehensive, inclusive and co-operative approach to the services we deliver.

Only by engaging and learning from our communities can we understand the inequalities that they face. Only by ensuring fully integrated health services can we address the inequalities affecting minorities such as lesbian, bisexual and trans women. Only by addressing those inequalities can we ensure that everyone has equal access to the support services and opportunities they need.

5.11 pm

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, and for the fact that the debate has been organised.

This debate has largely focused on how equality has been implemented in most of the United Kingdom—that is, Great Britain—but of course the context is very different in Northern Ireland. Not only do we share many of the problems that have been set out this afternoon, in relation to accessing rights and how that works in practice, but we have had long-running battles for equality that have only come to fruition in the past few months. For example, take the issue of abortion, which is relevant to this debate for reasons I will come to in a moment.

The Abortion Act went through this House in 1967, but it was only last year that reforms for Northern Ireland were put through this House. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) in that regard. Similarly, through the efforts of the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) and others, legislation passed to provide for equal marriage for Northern Ireland has passed through this House—again with a number of years' time lag. People in Northern Ireland are no different from people anywhere else in these islands, but very sadly we have had a much longer fight for our rights. The Irish sea has tended to form some sort of barrier where, in some people's eyes, natural biology seems to change, but the exact same issues and challenges exist in Northern Ireland, and it is very disappointing that we have had that struggle.

There has been some pushback in relation to why this House should have legislated for Northern Ireland, but sadly, owing to blockages in our system, previous attempts at reform have been unsuccessful in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and, of course, that Assembly was out of operation for a while. It is now operational again, but it is still uncertain whether these kinds of serious reforms can be taken forward. Speaking as a former Member of that Assembly, I had no difficulty whatsoever in this House last year having to legislate in both of those respects. I want to put on record my thanks and, indeed, the thanks of many other people in Northern Ireland who are only now benefiting from these changes following the House having taken those particular actions.

As I mentioned in an intervention, Northern Ireland is a very diverse society, and often the views that have been expressed in this Chamber and, indeed, by Members of the other place, have not been representative of the views of Northern Ireland, where there is clear majority support for LGBT rights right across the political spectrum. We very gladly see a change in that regard, but obviously we are on a journey that is still being made.

I want to make a number of points to specifically address the issue of LBT women and trans people.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Member has spoken extremely passionately and compellingly about the changes in Northern Ireland. Will he join me in paying tribute to the late, great Lyra McKee and the work that she did? Northern Ireland has some fine champions of equality and diversity, and she was one of the greatest. I recently had the privilege of meeting her partner, Sara Canning, who is also an incredible woman and also a great champion for LGBT equality. Lyra is sadly missed. I am sure that she will not be forgotten and that people in Northern Ireland will feel the power of her work for a very long time to come.

Stephen Farry: I am grateful to the hon. Member for that intervention. Indeed, Lyra McKee's legacy has many forms, not least in terms of giving further voice to social reforms that are being delivered. Her very sad death set in a particular context efforts made by both the UK and Irish Governments over the past number of months in relation to the restoration of devolution. Her memory will live long in Northern Ireland and, indeed, far beyond our shores.

I want first to make reference to the issue of abortion that I mentioned. I stress that this is a critical issue for lesbian and bisexual women, who are more likely to be pregnant as a result of sexual crime than heterosexual women. In Northern Ireland we have a mental health crisis. Homophobic and heterosexist bias is often, sadly, deeply ingrained in our society. LBT women and trans people therefore face huge levels of discrimination and social isolation. That often relates to issues such as how relationships and sex education is taken forward in our schools. That is not being done on a purely level playing field and on a purely objective basis. Sadly, homophobic bullying is still far too often a feature for our young people having to deal with their own experiences. Last year, the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment issued an exam question stating: "Explain two negative effects of sexual orientation on the wellbeing of a young person." That question was actually asked in an exam by a publicly funded body, so it is an example of how the situation is often loaded.

According to recent studies in Northern Ireland, about 70% of LBT women and 82% of trans people suffer from depression, and LBT women, in particular, have extremely elevated rates of self-harm. Owing to the effects of austerity and funding cuts in our health service, these issues are magnified for those facing other forms of discrimination, such as working-class LBT women, those with disabilities, and people of colour.

These are just a few examples of the policy reforms that we urgently need to see in Northern Ireland. We need proper research in terms of how we move things forward, notably on cervical screening uptake. We need rules on qualification for publicly funded IVF, and these need to be tailored for women who are in same-sex relationships. We need full implementation of donor intrauterine insemination regulations by the Regional Fertility Centre, as well as guidelines on eligibility.

We need mandatory training for healthcare professionals on aspects of healthcare such as LBT motherhood, and we need a fully operational gender identity clinic. Belfast's clinic has the longest waiting time of anywhere in the UK, with some individuals waiting as long as five years. We must have a system that is based on self-identification, to protect trans people from being forced down the dangerous path of self-medicating.

To make matters worse, Northern Ireland's only LBT women's organisation, HERE, is at risk of closure due to funding ending in June. The local Health Minister has rejected several requests for meetings and instead has lumped them in with a general roundtable on LGBT issues, rather than focusing on the immediate looming consequences. That is unacceptable and needs to be addressed and reversed as a matter of urgency.

Those are some of the particular challenges facing us in Northern Ireland. There is a commonality, to an extent, in terms of the issues. But I trust Members appreciate that we are coming from a further starting point in Northern Ireland, where we have not had the same equality in law, at least in theory, while we share common concerns in terms of equality in practice. I am very grateful, on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland, to all the Members of this House who have shown leadership over the past 12 months in trying to address some of those outstanding issues in our society.

5.21 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to take part in today's important and informative debate on health inequalities faced by lesbian, bisexual and trans women. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) for securing today's debate.

The aim of LBT Women's Health Week is to raise awareness of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer women's health inequalities, to make it easier for service providers to empower service users and for communities to support LGBTQ women. It is important for a range of reasons that we eliminate LBT health inequality and improve LBT health, to ensure that all individuals can lead long and healthy lives. It is worth considering Public Health England's review of health inequalities for lesbian and bisexual women, which reported:

"There is consistent evidence from the UK and internationally that there has been a paucity of attention, concern and research on lesbian and bisexual women's health inequalities."

That emphasises the importance of today's debate.

As we have heard today, the LBT community experience significant health inequalities and specific barriers to services and support. The many benefits of addressing these health concerns and reducing inequality include reducing disease transmission and progression, increased mental and physical wellbeing, reduced healthcare costs and, of course, increased longevity for the people involved.

We have heard from a range of speakers today, with some powerful testimony. My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston made many good points, talking about her own life experience and the value of her supportive network, which not everyone in the community benefits from. She said that coming out can be more traumatic for trans people than gay and bi people. I had not given that much consideration, and we should all remember that point. She highlighted a whole range of issues around safe sex and gave us details of dental dams. I go away informed—every day is a school day!

The hon. Member for Reigate talked about his personal experience of coming out in 2010. I am grateful for his work on the APPG on global LGBT rights. He informed us that this Parliament has more LGBT MPs than any other. As I say, every day is a school day, and it is a pleasure to take part in debates where we go away

having learned more than we came in knowing. He also said that we have delivered equality in law, and we now need to deliver in outcomes, and I wholeheartedly agree with that profound point.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) gave us some interesting statistics, including that 34% of advice workers said they were not confident dealing with trans people. That is a really important figure. In my research for today's debate, I had been looking at it from the other side, and that backs up what trans people are saying—Stonewall Scotland says that one in four LGBT people have experienced healthcare staff having a lack of understanding of their specific needs.

Kate Osborne: Does the hon. Member agree with me that it is essential to ensure that all NHS mental health services train all staff on the mental health needs of LGBT people, including the specific experiences and inequalities faced by LBT women?

Martyn Day: I thank the hon. Lady, and she has read my mind because that is exactly the point I was coming to. We are hearing it from both sides—from the healthcare workers and from the community—and both feel that there is a gap, so there is clearly a training requirement that we need to address as a society.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) spoke about stigma, and he used a phrase, “minorities within the minority”, which probably sums things up and really gets to the crux of it for the people we are discussing. Latterly, we heard from the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry), who gave us the Northern Ireland perspective. I think we can echo the issues of bias being ingrained in society and concerns about homophobic bullying throughout the rest of the United Kingdom, and I will touch on some of the Scottish perspectives.

Of course, no debate on health goes by without my mentioning that health is devolved and that in Scotland we do some things a little bit differently. Scotland has a really high record of health funding—up by over 60% under the SNP—and frontline health spending in Scotland is £136 per person higher than in England. In our recent budget, which has been termed the equality budget, we will continue to maintain Scotland's position as one of the most LGBTI-progressive countries in Europe. The budget's investment in mental health will have a positive impact on LGBTI people, who have higher rates of attempted suicide, self-harm, depression and anxiety.

Tackling hate crime also continues to be a top priority for the Scottish Government, and they will work with LGBTI stakeholders to challenge discrimination and to encourage understanding. An important point that we should take home is that every individual is some mother's son or daughter, and we need to be far more accepting of one another in our own society.

The definition of gender identity and transgender used in the Offences (Aggravation by Prejudice) (Scotland) Act 2009 is considered to be one of the most inclusive definitions in use. The Scottish Government will continue to work to reduce the stigma of HIV, raise awareness of the condition and reduce its transmission. Scotland is the first country in the UK to make PrEP available free of charge to those at the very highest risk of acquiring HIV.

It is clear that this is one area where our nations face many of the same challenges. In Scotland, LGBT people are at a higher risk of experiencing common mental health problems than the general population. Stonewall Scotland's survey of LGBT people in Scotland found, as we have heard, that almost half of LGBT people—49% on its figures—have experienced depression over the last year. My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston went through the whole range of figures, so I will not repeat them, but they bring home the very powerful point that there are real questions about inequality.

Scotland is an open and welcoming country. Prejudice, hate and discrimination will never be tolerated, and I believe that diversity makes Scotland richer and stronger, as well as happier and, I hope, healthier. The SNP Government are clear about the central equality of human rights to Scotland's future and the importance of inclusive growth, fair work and social justice to our economic success and our social wellbeing. Scotland is considered one of the most progressive countries in Europe in terms of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex equality, and we aim to preserve and advance Scotland's reputation as one of the most progressive countries in Europe for LGBTI equality.

In its 2015 rainbow map, the European Region of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association ranked Scotland as the most inclusive for LGBTI equality and human rights legislation: it met 92% of the ILGA's 48-point criteria. Changes by the SNP mean that Scotland has been named the best country in Europe for LGBTI legal equality by *Pink News*. Those are all achievements of which we can be proud. However, there remains much that needs doing, and we must continue tackling homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and all forms of discrimination, stigma and inequality.

This debate goes some way to highlighting these issues, and I would just end as I began by once again thanking the hon. Members responsible for bringing it here today.

5.28 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am pleased to be responding to this debate, which falls near the beginning of LBT Women's Health Week. The theme of this year's week is visibility, so this debate itself provides an important opportunity to raise awareness of the health inequalities that affect women in LGBTQ+ communities. I know that the other place debated these issues as recently as last week, but as the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) said, this is the first time that these issues have been specifically discussed in this Chamber. The week provides an opportunity for communities, practitioners, local government, health and social care providers and commissioners of services, as well as ourselves in this place, to take a close look at what progress has been made in improving the health and wellbeing of all women in our communities and supporting them to take action, because, as we have heard in the debate today, there are some excellent examples of good practice and progress around the country but more needs to be done to support LGBTQ+ women.

The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) opened the debate and said she hoped it would be conducted with respect and integrity, and I believe it has been. As always, she conducted herself with respect

and integrity, and she spoke with great openness and sincerity about her own experiences, which I hope will prove an inspiration to others. I was particularly impressed by the humility she showed in recognising that her own position and privilege might have made it easier for her to come out than it would be for other people to do so, but I am sure it was still not an easy thing to do.

The hon. Lady spoke about the mental health challenges facing people and also issues in accessing healthcare. She gave us the staggering fact from a survey in Scotland that about half of all trans people have considered taking their own life. That was particularly worrying and concerning, and should cause us all to think about what more we can do. The personal testimonies she gave were extremely powerful and put many of the figures that we have heard today into a much more personal and meaningful context.

The hon. Member for Reigate was absolutely right to say that equality in law is not the same as equality in outcome, and he highlighted some of the findings from the Women and Equalities Committee report, which I will return to shortly. He was also right to highlight some of the initiatives that have been successful and also some of the areas where we need to do more.

It was a pleasure to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake); it was the first time I have heard her speak in the Chamber. She shone a spotlight on an area we do not talk about very much: the social care sector and some of the bullying and discrimination that is happening there. It is certainly the case that, as she said, much more education and training is needed. My hon. Friend was also right to say that the approach to health and care needs to be much more holistic to take account of the needs of the individual; she got the tone absolutely right in making that point.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) gave a very thoughtful speech, and one point I took from what he said was that we need a lot more data and research in these areas to really understand the issues that we are dealing with. The hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) spoke very powerfully and movingly about the progress that has been made in Northern Ireland, but also about some of the challenges that are still faced there.

As we have heard during the debate, there are higher rates of poor mental health, misinformation about sexual health, difficulties in accessing healthcare, and experiences of discrimination, harassment and domestic abuse. There are multiple barriers facing LBTQ+ women that prevent them from having a healthy and happy life, and that is simply because of who they are.

Several Members mentioned Stonewall's 2018 report, "LGBT in Britain", and we must use that as a touchstone for what to do in future. It found a worryingly high rate of mental health issues suffered by LBT women. The report itself told of harrowing experiences of discrimination and harassment in daily life, rejection by family and friends and people being subjected to hate crimes just because of who they were. These things clearly all have a devastating impact on a person's mental health.

Over a quarter of lesbians and 42% of bisexual women report having a long-term mental health condition, with bisexual women being four times more likely to have long-term mental health problems than straight

women, and 28% of bisexual women and 40% of lesbians said they deliberately harmed themselves in the last year, compared with 6% of adults in general. The fact that incidents of self-harm are over four times greater for bisexual women and twice the rate for lesbians than for the general population should give us all cause to think about the difficulties these communities are facing. Some 19.2% of lesbian women and 30.5% of bisexual women also reported having an eating disorder. Despite the clear levels of need we have talked about, the 2018 national LGBT survey found that when it comes to accessing mental health care, about 50% of LGBQ women and 53% of trans women found accessing those services "not easy" or "not easy at all". The LGB&T Partnership also found that lesbians, at 25%, and bi women, at 32%, are more likely to describe themselves as having fair or poor health than heterosexual women, at 21%. Studies have shown that lesbian and bisexual women also have higher risks of obesity and cardiovascular disease. Two national patient surveys in England found that the prevalence of all cancers is higher in lesbians, at 4.4%, and bisexual women, at 4.2%, than heterosexual women, at 3.6%. In terms of sexual health, less than half of lesbian and bisexual women have ever been screened for sexually transmitted infections, but half of those who have were found to have had an STI.

Despite the clear advice from Public Health England that all women aged 25 to 49 should be screened for cervical cancer, there are conflicting messages still from health professionals which mean that lesbian and bi women are much less likely to attend their cervical screening appointments, with one in five lesbian and bisexual women reporting having been told by a healthcare professional that they were not at risk of cervical cancer. Overall, lesbian and bisexual women are up to 10 times less likely to have had a cervical screening test in the past three years than heterosexual women, yet bisexual women are more than twice as likely to have cervical cancer than heterosexual women.

The picture for breast cancer screening is a little more positive, with four in five lesbians over the age of 50 having attended their breast screening invitation, which is a similar figure to that for heterosexual women. But trans women taking oestrogen may be at increased risk of breast cancer and may not be routinely invited for screening, particularly if the gender marker on their records is "male". Macmillan also found that many breast health awareness messages are delivered to women when they attend clinics for contraception or cervical screening, meaning lesbian and bisexual women and trans men with breast tissue may be less aware.

There are serious concerns that poor access and poor experiences contribute to poorer health outcomes. The National LGB&T Partnership tells us that 8.1% of lesbians, 5.9% of bisexual and 15.4% of trans women experienced inappropriate questions because of their sexuality when accessing healthcare. In its report, Stonewall found that discrimination, both experienced and expected, can deter LGBT women from accessing healthcare when they need it, with one respondent saying:

"Medical professionals are not that good with lesbians. I don't go to the GP very often because they're not familiar with lesbian issues usually."

That is disappointing to hear, because I often stand at this Dispatch Box and praise our wonderful NHS staff. We all know that they do a tremendous job under

increasing pressure, but, as this report shows, while most health and social care staff do their best to deliver the best possible care, the fact that one in seven LGBT people avoid seeking healthcare for fear of discrimination shows that there are training issues. I will address those issues a little later.

A Women and Equalities Committee report in 2016 found that trans women face lengthy delays to accessing gender identity services, averaging a two to three-year wait. That is a very long time considering the constitutional target for referral to treatment is 18 weeks. That ought to be addressed as a matter of urgency. The 2018 national LGBT survey found that a quarter of trans women felt their specific needs in relation to their gender identity were ignored or not taken into account when accessing healthcare. Three in five trans people said they have experienced a lack of understanding of specific trans health needs by healthcare staff

The evidence is clear that there is a need for action to reduce health inequalities. Providing the best possible, high-quality healthcare does mean delivering care without prejudice. It also requires an understanding of specific health needs and an understanding of the challenges particular communities face. Following the 2017 national LGBT survey, the Government's Equalities Office produced an LGBT action plan in 2018 which included more than 75 commitments across a whole range of areas. With regards to health there were commitments to

"ensure that LGBT people's needs are at the heart of the National Health Service",

including appointing a national adviser to provide leadership on reducing the health inequalities that LGBT people face, enhancement of fertility services for LGBT people, improving mental healthcare and improving the way gender identity services work for adults.

In the annual progress report for 2018-19, which was presented to Parliament, I know that some progress on those recommendations was made. The National LGBT health adviser was appointed and a funded programme to trial new approaches to tackling LGBT health inequalities was launched.

The Government said that it was their intention to deliver the remainder of the commitments from the action plan over the next three years. Will the Minister update us on how those plans are going along? In particular, the Government's stated priorities for action are: looking at ways to improve the mental healthcare for LGBT people, developing a plan to reduce suicides among the LGBT population, and the transformation of adult gender identity services. There was also a pledge that NHS England would fund the Royal College of Physicians to develop the United Kingdom's first accredited training course in gender medicine, which will begin accepting recruits shortly. I am not sure whether the progress report for 2019-20 has been published yet, but perhaps the Minister can update us on that and on what progress is being made and when the next report is due.

As we heard, in October last year, the Women and Equalities Committee published a report on health and social care in LGBT communities following its inquiry, which called for evidence on how well policy makers and service providers were taking into account the health and social care needs of LGBT communities. It received over 100 written submissions and heard oral evidence from people about their experiences, as well

as community groups, advocacy organisations, policy experts, local authorities, public service providers and politicians.

As we heard, the report found that unsurprisingly, there are many significant health inequalities for LGBT communities and that they face numerous barriers in accessing health and social care. We are yet to see the Government's response to the Committee's report. While I appreciate that it was published just prior to Dissolution, it would be useful if the Minister indicated when the Government's response to that will be provided.

There are many recommendations in the report—23 in total—and I will not talk about them all today, but I would like to draw one or two to the House's attention. I agree with the report, Stonewall and the National LGB&T Partnership that monitoring both sexual orientation and gender identity is far too important to be left as an aspiration rather than a concrete goal. If monitoring remains optional, health disparities will continue and remain hidden across services if they choose not to implement it. I believe that all providers must implement sexual orientation and trans status monitoring alongside training for frontline staff to collect the data, so that as with all personal data, information on sexual orientation and trans status is collected and recorded sensitively.

The Committee also recommended that sexual orientation monitoring should be made mandatory across all NHS and state social care providers by October this year and that service providers that fail to implement it should face fines equivalent to those for not monitoring ethnicity. It also recommended that gender identity monitoring work should be accelerated with a view to creating a standard by the end of 2019 and then rolled out on a mandatory basis to the whole NHS and state social care providers by the end of the year. We know that one of the roles of the national adviser is to advise the Government on the implementation of sexual orientation monitoring across the NHS. Will the Minister update us on what progress has been made in implementing the plans and whether the recommendations will be completed in the timeframe set out?

The Committee's report recommends that all NHS and social care providers should ensure that all staff understand their legal responsibility to deliver services that are inclusive of LGBT people. We have touched on the fact that training will play an important role, and I agree with the Committee that those responsible for the education and training of health and social care professionals should treat training on LGBT needs as being as integral as any other training.

I support Stonewall's call for all health and social care staff to receive LGBT-inclusive training on meeting the needs of LGBT people throughout their careers. Again, given that one of the national adviser's specified roles is to improve healthcare professionals' awareness of LGBT issues, will the Minister update us on what plans the Government have to improve and enhance ongoing training on these issues so that services are inclusive?

The Committee also recommended that the Government should consult on ways in which effective knowledge and understanding of unacceptable discriminatory practices and the Equality Act 2010 could be ensured among the highest range of health providers. Again, will the Minister advise the House whether there has been any progress on that?

Finally, the report made several recommendations regarding the importance of leadership on this issue from the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England. It is clear that if we are to see the improvements that we need, all local health and social care organisations must actively consider the needs of their LGBT women, as required by the public sector equality duty. I support the Committee's recommendations that this should be mandated directly from the Department and NHS England as part of commissioning requirements and as a prerequisite for receiving funding. As the hon. Member for Reigate said, the Department and NHS England should work together to create an inclusive commissioning toolkit that health commissioners can use to spread best practice in commissioning inclusive services, and any bids found to be lacking should be passed on to the EHRC for enforcement action.

I also agree with the Committee and the hon. Member that we need joined-up working across the whole of Government. As we know, the Government Equalities Office has the lead on the LGBT issues and the action plan, which includes healthcare, but it is separate from and not included in the NHS long-term plan. This issue was raised in the other place last week, but the response was not particularly helpful. Does the Minister agree that the response implied that all responsibility for LGBT healthcare lay with the GEO and that this is something we need to reconsider?

The Committee also recommends that NHS England and the GEO work together to produce the next LGBT action plan update and be a signatory to it. Will the Government take forward that very practical and sensible recommendation? On leadership, can the Minister provide any assurances that there will be continued funding for the national advisor for LGBT health beyond the end of this month, as they are needed to drive forward the inclusion agenda throughout health and social care? It would be a welcome signal from the Government that they are determined to give this issue the importance it deserves.

5.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): I congratulate the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) on securing this debate and on the sensitive but frank way she has approached it. We came into this place together, and I am grateful to her for the way she has given a voice to other women. As the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) said, that is the theme this year, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) said, having this debate on the Floor of the House and giving a voice to those who feel their voice is not heard sufficiently is something we really can do. It was great to see hon. Members from all four nations coming together in the Chamber today to give a voice to the LBT community.

I have drawn from the contributions of all hon. Members a selection of themes, especially around mental health barriers and discrimination. As the hon. Member for Livingston said, we are on a journey. My hon. Friend said we were making history today, but history is yesterday; tomorrow is the future, and that is where we need to refocus and start to deliver. I thank him, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake), my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) and the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) for their considered contributions.

We have heard about the challenges facing those for whom life is so tough they think of taking their own lives—I know that the 52% figure, which the hon. Member for Livingston mentioned, is for Scotland, but the figures do not vary particularly across the nations—and about the higher rates of self-harm and eating disorders, and the barriers to conversations about people's health that can prevent them from taking responsibility for their health and the effect that can have on general wellbeing. I pay tribute, as several Members did, to the charities and institutions working hard, day after day, to give people a voice and provide better access to services.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate said, the global LGBT rights position is very different. We have made great strides in legislation in this country, but health outcomes are the key. Individuals should not have to fit the system; the system should adapt to them, because if it does not feel right or give the right outcomes, it is highly unlikely they will access it in the right way. My hon. Friend also highlighted the lack of training, and the fact that it was a mainstream problem throughout the healthcare system—as the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam also did, very eloquently. He pointed out that this was a challenge for all elements of the healthcare profession, from general practice and nurses to social care and care towards the end of life.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge for making such an informed speech. "Recognising the minorities within the minority" is a phrase that I will take away. He mentioned intersectionality. Stigma does ruin lives, and compounds issues involving gender, sexuality and a plethora of other matters before people even reach the point of access to services.

I was struck by my hon. Friend's comment about the need to tailor services to the needs of the communities whom we serve. I have been up and down the country, but I particularly remember sitting and talking to people at a charity in Manchester. I learnt that young people in particular will often move towards towns because they feel that services will be better, that there is a degree of invisibility, or that there will be others there with whom they have some connection. So tailoring services in a more compassionate and reasoned way should be at the front and centre of what we do.

In his frank speech, the hon. Member for North Down described how many challenges still exist, but made it clear that if we all work together it will be much easier to overcome that. I noted what he said about the need for a better understanding of the guidelines, and about the position of women who find themselves in need of a termination having suffered sexual crimes and abuse. The beauty of these debates is that sometimes we are given something to think about that we may not have thought about before.

As we have heard, the debate is timely, given that this is National Lesbian, Bisexual and Trans Women's Health Week. We have made great strides in advancing equality for LGBT people, from changing the law to allow same-sex couples to marry to introducing the world's first transgender action plan in 2011. However, we know that we must maintain the progress, and continue to work together on implementing the LGBT action plan.

It is only right that all of us, irrespective of gender or sexual orientation, are able to lead happy and fulfilling lives, with equal opportunities and without fear of

discrimination—lives that allow us to look forward to what we have ahead of us, and not back to what we might have missed. People should be able to access healthcare free of discrimination and on the basis of who they really are, and we should ensure that education helps all those in the health sphere to deliver.

Back in 2017 the Government launched a national survey targeting LGBT individuals in order to understand better the real issues impacting communities. Attracting some 108,000 responses, it remains the largest national survey of its kind. My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate spoke very well about that. Such an overwhelming response is a clear demonstration of the strength of feeling in the LGBT community among people who want to be heard and to make a difference wherever they live in the UK, in inner cities or rurally. Living in a rural village can be more isolating than living in a town or city.

In response to that survey, we committed ourselves to bold action, publishing the LGBT action plan in July 2018. It acknowledged the need for a cross-Government approach to tackling inequality. The plan, led by the Government Equalities Office, highlighted key areas of focus including health, education and safety among others. For the purposes of this debate, I will focus on the health commitments.

It is unacceptable that, as the evidence shows, LGBT individuals face significant inequalities, especially in their health outcomes. The provision of comprehensive health and social care for all, irrespective of gender or sexual orientation, remains a cornerstone of the national health service, and one to which we remain committed. Delivery of our health commitments outlined in the LGBT action plan remains a priority for us. We have made significant progress, including appointing the first national LGBT health adviser, Dr Michael Brady. To answer the question put by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care gave a commitment to the Women and Equalities Committee last July that the health adviser's role would continue beyond March this year. Final arrangements to confirm that are currently being agreed with NHSE&I. Starting to identify the organisations best able to deliver adult gender dysphoria services and funding the Royal College of Physicians to develop the UK's first accredited training course in gender medicine are examples of the significant progress that we have made.

It is worth reflecting for a minute on the appointment of Dr Brady, who is a sexual health and HIV consultant at King's College Hospital, as well as medical director of the Terrence Higgins Trust. He remains committed to working across the NHS and to ensuring that the needs of LGBT people are considered throughout the health service. He is passionate about the creation of a workforce equipped with the relevant knowledge and skills to enable them to better deliver patient care that is focused on the needs of individuals. We have heard repeatedly this afternoon that the individual is sometimes lost when they are trying to access healthcare out there. I would like to take this opportunity to thank him and his team for their continued efforts and dedication in driving that work forward.

We have focused on the needs of the community as a whole, but it is important that we do not fall into the trap of thinking that this is a homogeneous group.

That was something that my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge bought up. I recognise that we must think carefully about different needs, including understanding the needs of lesbian, bisexual and trans women within their own communities. It is vital that we develop a sound evidence base to support future policy improvements. That will also help with the education of others, because unless we can explain why we are doing something, it is hard to train others in why they should be doing it.

I have heard the concerns about the lack of data on sexual orientation and the impact of this on evidence-based policy decisions. We know that robust data collection on sexual orientation enables policy makers, commissioners and providers to better identify potential health risks. We can then provide targeted preventive early interventions to address health inequalities. As with most things, when these issues are tackled early, there is often much less consequential damage further down the line.

The national LGBT health adviser continues to lead on the introduction of effective sexual orientation, gender identity and trans status monitoring across the NHS and social care system. That is no easy task. It is imperative that lessons are learned from the previous sexual orientation monitoring information standard pilot, and that the work is aligned across Government. The national adviser plans to relaunch the SOM across the system to raise awareness about why we need to collect data on sexual orientation and how we share the learning from areas that are already implementing things successfully. If we can learn from best practice, we should do so. I understand that progress on this seems slower than some would hope, but we want to make this happen in the most effective way in order to reduce health inequalities.

Access to, and the provision of, mental health services for LGBT people is constantly reported as a major inequality. The GP patient survey last year found that lesbian women were nearly three times as likely, and bisexual women more than four times as likely, as heterosexual women to report a long-term mental health condition. As the hon. Member for Livingston articulated so well, this has a real effect on real lives. I firmly believe that the publication of the NHS long-term plan and the actions it contains will enable us to better identify such inequalities and implement tailored interventions. Local areas are being supported to redesign and reorganise core community mental health teams, and to move towards more place-based, multidisciplinary services that align with the primary care networks.

We remain focused on the need to reduce suicide across the LGBT community, while recognising that today we are talking specifically about women. There are several cross-Government initiatives, including the national suicide prevention strategy, the cross-Government suicide prevention workplan, which was published in January 2019, and the local authority suicide prevention plans. Suicide and self-harm is more prevalent among LGBT communities. It should not surprise anyone that the right to be happy includes being able to be who you are.

I recognise that there is concern about access to screening programmes, particularly for the trans community and for trans women in particular, and that that might lead to poorer outcomes for this population group. It is imperative that all groups are treated with dignity and respect at all times, and that they should not fear embarrassment or intrusive questions when accessing

such services. The focus must be on ensuring that trans and non-binary people are aware of the screening programmes for which they are eligible, and understand those to which they will not routinely be invited. Public Health England's comprehensive screening leaflet, "Information for trans people", aims to improve accessibility to screening for trans and non-binary individuals. It has been developed in collaboration with NHS Choices and representatives of the trans community.

As I am sure many Members are aware, there has been a significant increase in demand for adult gender identity services. These crucial NHS services treat individuals with gender dysphoria, whereby they experience distress and discomfort due to a mismatch between their biological and gender identity. In response, NHS England launched an ambitious programme of work to tackle waiting times and improve access—which I know is still challenging—setting out places to establish new gender services in primary and community settings, and increasing the amount of surgical services and the number of gender dysphoria clinics. That is critical if the Government are to achieve their ambition to support everyone, irrespective of gender and sexual orientation, to live a happy and healthy life.

In conclusion, it is clear that, while we have made significant progress, there is still much more to do. As the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) said, we are all the same, no matter where we live in the UK. I reiterate that the Government have made real progress and we will continue to make a positive change. I am sure that the House is united on the need to reduce LGBT health inequalities. We all have the right to have our healthcare needs met. The contributions made to this debate will undoubtedly help drive forward our commitment and keep us focused.

6.3 pm

Hannah Bardell: I thank everybody who has spoken in this debate, particularly my hon. Friend, I would like to call him, the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt). He gave evidence to the Backbench Business Committee and has done a huge amount of work, as has Anna Robinson of the APPG on global LGBT+ rights. All speakers have conducted themselves in a respectful and thoughtful manner. This place is at its best when we agree on issues that are not often discussed and when we shine a light on issues that are sometimes discussed in a very toxic environment. I hope we have given more light than heat to those issues.

The hon. Members for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) and for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) are new Members who have come to this place with experience and insight as health professionals, and I think that will serve us all well. I listened with interest to their contributions on the work that they are doing and have done, which is hugely important.

The hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) brought the Northern Irish perspective. As he rightly said, there have been huge leaps forward in recent times. We wish him and the people of Northern Ireland well as they embark on, hopefully, a new chapter in their history, but also in terms of equality for LGBT people. My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) brought the specific Scottish perspective and was able to put a number of points that I did not have time to make—I felt I had been indulgent enough.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) highlighted some of the major health challenges that LBT women face, and talked specifically about the report that the Women and Equalities Committee produced on health and social care for the LGBT community. That was a really insightful report and drew on such a wide range of experience. That is why the Committees of this House are so important, and why making sure they function properly is incredibly important. The Minister gave a very thoughtful response, and I know that our constituents and, I hope, the LGBT community will take a lot from that. We know there is still a long way to go, and I hope that she will be able to address the specific points that I raised on behalf of the people who got in touch with me, perhaps in a letter. It was very powerful reading their testimonies and reading the concerns that they had. They show that there is still a long way to go, particularly for those in the trans community seeking to get services.

We have a particular challenge in Scotland. One of the testimonies that the Pink Saltire included in a film that it made a couple of years ago, which I rewatched in preparation for this debate, was from a non-binary person who had to have surgery in England and had to fly home, leading to stitches bursting and terrible scarring. That is real detail that is not much talked about, but we have to reflect on it and make sure that in all parts of the UK and all countries in the UK there are the right services, and people can be treated and supported as close to home as possible.

We have to thank the Backbench Business Committee once again, and you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It has been an important debate and I know that the LGBT community will be grateful to Members for raising these issues. I hope it will take us a step forward in our fight for equality.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered lesbian, bisexual and trans women's health inequalities.

PETITIONS

Cost of School Uniforms

6.7 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The overall cost of school uniform has become an intolerable financial burden for many families in the UK. The RE:Uniform scheme in my constituency has been a huge success, providing new-to-them uniform for more than 500 families. But my constituents want statutory protection from expensive, over-prescriptive uniform codes and a lack of choice of supplier. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on the private Member's Bill he will introduce on this issue on Friday. I pay tribute to Reverend David Spiers and Susie Steel for their hard work in running the RE:Uniform project in my constituency, and wish them all the best for the re-running of it this summer.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to bring forward legislation to: limit the number of compulsory branded items of school-wear; ensure that all items are available from at least two suppliers; cap the total cost of compulsory items of school-wear.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that there has been an overall increase in the cost of school uniforms; further that at the same time there has been an overall increase in the range of items now prescribed by schools; further that there has been an increase in the range of school-wear carrying school branding, removing the choice of lower cost alternatives; further that some schools have further limited parental choice by naming single approved suppliers; and further that these changes have put intolerable financial burdens on families already struggling with the cost of living.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to bring forward legislation to: limit the number of compulsory branded items of school-wear; ensure that all items are available from at least two suppliers; cap the total cost of compulsory items of school-wear.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002557]

Red diesel

6.9 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): This issue was brought to my attention by Jamie Smart, NFU Scotland's transport adviser, and I believe it to be an unintended consequence of an otherwise good policy on environmental fuels. Farmers in our area and the wider east of Scotland say their filters are blocking up after 100 or 200 hours, instead of around 500 hours. This issue has been reported to NFU Scotland by around 400 of its members, so it is quite a serious problem.

The petition reads:

The petition of Jamie Smart,

Declares that urgent action is required to address the ongoing problems farmers are experiencing with blocked filters in their machinery due to the use of bio-fuel; also notes the UK Government needs to work with the devolved administrations, the British Standards Institution, fuel companies and the National Farming Unions to resolve this issue; and further notes that financial assistance must be urgently provided to enable immediate action that mitigates further losses and compensates affected farmers.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reallocate funding to the British Standards Institution to facilitate the establishment of a group to investigate the issue of bio-fuel in machinery; also that the specifications of bio-fuel levels in red diesel is urgently reviewed; and that known and potential issues with biodiesel fuels are considered at the earliest opportunity.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002564]

East Putney Station: Step-free Access

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

6.10 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to introduce my first Adjournment debate. I also thank the Minister for being here to hear me put my case for step-free access at East Putney tube station.

This is an issue of huge concern to my constituents in Putney, and it reflects a wider problem facing disabled passengers and parents of small children up and down the country. East Putney is one of only two tube stations serving my constituency, and it provides a vital connection to the underground network and a transport connection to the nearby Putney train station. East Putney is a hugely important station on the Wimbledon branch of the District line, and it was built in 1889.

The latest available figures show a footfall of 6.18 million passengers a year through East Putney station, more than neighbouring Southfields and Putney Bridge stations. Despite that, there is currently no step-free access to the station platform. There are just two very steep, very high staircases. By the standards of normal staircases, they are relatively dangerous. This is more than just an inconvenience; it presents an insurmountable barrier to many disabled residents, parents of small children and those who are unsteady on their feet, and it potentially cuts them off from the underground network and from affordable public transport altogether. This is a basic equality issue, not just a financial or logistical issue, although I will make the case for those.

I have four children, and three of them were under five at the same time. With the baby and toddler in a double buggy and the four-year-old clinging on, I would not have been able to use East Putney station, meaning I would have been more isolated than I was during those years when I had small children. For many women who have small children, and it is mainly women, it means they cannot use their local station for their many needs.

I know of people in wheelchairs being turned away from the station, having not realised there is no lift. People who have had accidents resulting in mobility issues for a few weeks or months have had huge problems getting to work, or have not been able to do so. Elderly people can never use their station to get to appointments, to visit friends and family or to enjoy the rest of our wonderful city, so they are more isolated, which in turn brings about health problems.

Transport for London and the Mayor do an outstanding job of upgrading our underground network in very trying fiscal circumstances. I recently visited the District line signalling centre at Earl's Court to discuss and observe the four lines modernisation programme, and I saw for myself the scale of the project it is delivering, which will have huge benefits for passengers. We need step-free access to go alongside that huge infrastructure investment.

Did you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, that only 28% of London Underground stations are step free? We only reached that figure by virtue of the Mayor's step-free access programme launched in 2016, which I warmly

welcome. We must do better than 28%, which is why I was pleased when I heard that TfL will be upgrading a new tranche of stations by 2024, taking the total proportion of step-free stations to 38%. However, I was dismayed to learn that East Putney was not on the list, and nor are there any plans or timescales in place to deliver step-free access at East Putney before 2024.

I have asked TfL why East Putney was excluded from the list, and it informed me that the station did not meet the initial criteria for funding under the step-free access programme. I want to challenge that decision. The criteria for funding include factors such as: cost; opportunity; deliverability; how challenging the construction will be; and the strategic importance of the station, taking account of things such as targeting areas with no accessible stations or interchanges that will allow people to access different route options—this is the case at Putney. Although I recognise that installing lifts at stations is expensive, and that, given TfL's tight budget, tough decisions have to be made, I feel that excluding East Putney is a huge oversight and this must be reconsidered. There are several strong arguments to be made on that.

The first is that putting East Putney on the list would be good value for money. I would like to see more of the financial justification for the decision. As I have said, East Putney station has 6.18 million journeys a year, according to the most recent figures. That is more than neighbouring stations, which either have step-free access, as in the case of Southfields, which has a footfall of 6.03 million a year, or are already on TfL's list for upcoming upgrades this year, as in the case of Wimbledon Park, which has 2.18 million passengers a year. The estimated cost of the East Putney station upgrade is £7 million, for more than 6 million passenger journeys a year. The estimate for the Wimbledon Park upgrade is more than £5 million, for 2 million passengers a year, so East Putney station would be better value for money. Let me assure anyone listening in Wimbledon Park that I am not saying we should not upgrade Wimbledon Park station; I am just saying that the case for East Putney station is very strong.

Secondly, all 13 stations in the current wave of step-free work where upgrades are due to be delivered in 2020 have considerably fewer passengers than East Putney. North Ealing, on the Piccadilly line, has fewer than 1 million passenger journeys a year, compared with more than 6 million at East Putney. Let me assure people listening in North Ealing that I am not saying that we should not upgrade North Ealing; I am just saying that the case for East Putney is very strong.

Thirdly, a lack of step-free access significantly hinders successful transport integration in this area of Putney, in south-west London. Putney station is serviced by South Western Railway, and it is just a short distance from East Putney station. It had an extensive multi-million-pound modernisation just a few years ago, which included the installation of lifts, but those with mobility issues who use it are then precluded from going on to use the underground. We are missing a huge trick here.

Air quality is another factor in this, too. As Members will know, the Government are aiming to reduce air pollution nationally, including in Putney, which experiences some of the highest levels of air toxicity in London. Some 9,000 premature deaths a year in London alone are attributable to our poor air quality—this is a matter

of life and death, and it disproportionately impacts disadvantaged families, many of whom are now unable to use their affordable public transport because of the lack of step-free access. This is an essential and easy win to clean up our air and improve our health.

There is a further, economic, case to be made. Analysis conducted a few years ago by the Department for Transport showed that for every pound invested in station accessibility, there was a £2.9 benefit for London's economy, so this makes financial sense. From an operational and strategic perspective, it seems disingenuous not to grant East Putney tube station step-free access. Wandsworth Council is currently producing a feasibility study and is shortlisting achievable lift options for this station. When this study is published, the Government and TfL must engage seriously with the report and its findings.

As I said at the start of my speech, accessibility should not boil down simply to cost, deliverability and operationality; it is fundamentally an equality issue. As is often the case with this Government, equality has a price cap. The fundamental barrier to step-free access at East Putney tube station is financing—there simply is not enough money available—but it is unacceptable that a great many disabled and immobile residents and parents of small children in Putney are being denied access to the underground because of inadequate funding streams and bad luck in the postcode lottery. We cannot put a price on equality. Compared with the huge sums that are about to be spent on HS2, a new lift for East Putney station is small change.

Transport for London should not be forced, as it currently is, to pick and choose between where and who gets step-free access; it is the Government's responsibility to ensure that inclusivity and equality are embedded for every journey taken, but they are currently failing. Under the now scrapped Equality 2025 programme, the coalition Government had a target for disabled people to have the same access to transportation as non-disabled people by 2025. We are clearly way off that target. In the 2015 to 2019 rail investment control period, the Government cut £47 million from the Access for All funding stream, showing that they are not serious about step-free access.

After 10 years of Tory austerity, accessibility is one example of the hostile environment we have seen for disabled people. Only last year, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights concluded that cuts to Government spending on disabled people have violated the human rights of disabled people in the UK. The hundreds of train and tube stations throughout the country without step-free access are symptomatic of the hostile environment. We on the Opposition Benches hear a lot of talk from the Government about levelling up: levelling up should not just be applied to regions; it needs to be applied to people, too.

To conclude, I would like the Minister to join me this evening in championing the need for step-free access at East Putney tube station. I have two specific requests of him. First, I would like him to approach Transport for London and urge it to review and reconsider its decision to exclude East Putney tube station from the step-free access programme, in the light of the arguments that I have made and the upcoming publication of the feasibility study by Wandsworth Borough Council. Secondly, I would like him to urgently make more funding available to Transport for London for its step-free access upgrade

programme, so that everyone in Putney can use public transport and have equal opportunities to get affordably to leisure, work, learning, and family and friends.

6.22 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): I thank the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) for securing this debate on an important topic. She is a new Member and is certainly starting with a very good cause indeed on behalf of her constituents. As a new Member, she might not know that a particular parliamentary tradition has been broken this evening, although not by her and not by me. I believe it is part of the Standing Orders of the House that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) should be present for every Adjournment debate. In my experience—I have been in the House since 2010—this is the first for which he has not been present. I thought he deserved at least an honourable mention, because I know he would have intervened with a salient point on this subject.

Step-free access to stations, and transport accessibility more generally, is of course vital, not just for London but for passengers throughout England, as the hon. Lady said. I believe strongly that everybody should have equal access to transport services and opportunities, and that access should be as smooth and seamless as possible for all. Transport is not just a key to economic opportunity and activity; it allows us all to explore, to meet friends, to go to see family and to do all the things that we all love to do. As a former chairman of the all-party group on learning disability, I am very aware of the power of the purple pound and how we need to work much harder to achieve a truly accessible railway and tube network for people with disabilities and, as the hon. Lady highlighted, mothers and anybody else who needs help with accessibility.

East Putney, like many stations across both the rail network and the underground network, dates from a time when the needs of the disabled and less mobile passengers were simply not considered. Thankfully, we now give these considerations far more thought. Of course, there is more to be done, and it is absolutely right that both Transport for London and the Department that I am representing tonight—the Department for Transport—do all we can to make the older stations accessible to all in a speedy and cost efficient manner.

As the hon. Lady knows, step-free access at East Putney station, as with all the stations on the underground network, is a matter for the Mayor and Transport for London. Transport for London has an ongoing programme to make stations across its networks step-free and more accessible for everyone. I understand that more than 200 stations on the TfL network are now step-free, including 79 underground stations. However, with a large number of old stations, it is both costly and time-consuming to make them fit for the 21st century, but the works must be prioritised. Transport for London has a range of criteria to determine which stations to next make step-free, including current access to step-free public transport, the number of journeys through a station and the feasibility of delivering step-free access at that station. Against these criteria, I understand that East Putney station has not been included, as the hon. Lady said, in the current TfL business plan under that programme, and that TfL is therefore unable to confirm a timescale for making the station step-free. I know

from her speech that this is very disappointing for her and I do sympathise that, sometimes, Transport for London and the Department for Transport cannot achieve things for all of our constituents as quickly as we would like.

Despite this challenge, I am pleased that my Department works very closely with Transport for London, and I am glad to see that it recognises the importance of this work and of taking action for the benefit of residents and visitors alike.

I thought that I should say something about what my Department is doing. Obviously, my Department has no real say over what Transport for London does, but for our part, it is moving forward with delivering a whole inclusive transport system, and our inclusive transport strategy sets out the key policy and investment priorities to make that happen. We are making the rail network more accessible through the Access For All programme. This funding is part of Network Rail's enhancements portfolio for control period six—Network Rail works in five-year control periods—and is therefore only available for mainline train stations. To receive funding, stations are nominated by the rail industry and then selected on a range of criteria, including their ability to provide value for money for the taxpayer.

More than 200 stations have been made accessible as part of the programme, and around 1,500 receive smaller-scale enhancements, such as accessible toilets or tactile paving and the like. I have been lobbied very hard by a huge number of Members of Parliament who have stations in their constituencies that do not have proper accessibility. My hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry) behind me—I know that he is behind me because I can hear his breathing—has lobbied me very hard, because Beeston station in his constituency has not been included so far. In my own constituency, I have only one station, Long Buckby, and I know that it is very far down the list of making it truly accessible.

We have made £300 million available to add another 73 stations to the Access For All main programme. This is in addition to accessibility improvements delivered as part of other projects or as infrastructure renewals. On 26 February this year, the Department announced 40 projects covering 124 stations selected to receive smaller-scale access improvements, such as new lifts, accessible toilets and customer information screens.

In addition, we have been trying to bend the Chancellor's arm and we are hoping—fingers crossed, touching wood and I am not pre-announcing anything because that will get me into trouble—that he might announce another £50 million to add another 12 or so stations to the main programme. Although London Underground stations are not eligible for this funding, numerous mainline stations in London have benefited from this programme in the past, and I am quite sure will do so in the future.

It is true that London no longer directly receives a revenue grant from the Government. However, the Mayor does now receive a greater proportion of business rates income to direct towards his priorities, and this funding forms a significant proportion of TfL's overall income. I am glad to see that station accessibility appears to be one of his priorities.

I thank the hon. Member for Putney for raising this important debate. As I have said, I am committed to making transport accessible for all, but I have no doubt

that this is a significant challenge. It will require all of us interested in transport to work together for the benefit of passengers. As ever, my Department wants to learn how we can do transport accessibility better, as well as sharing learning from our own projects.

The hon. Member wanted to challenge Transport for London on its decision not to include East Putney in its current step-free access programme, and she really did that today in her excellent contribution. She asked me to approach TfL, which I will happily do. I am in relatively constant contact with the organisation over a

whole range of issues. When it comes to more funding for TfL, it is a devolved body that, as I mentioned, gets its money from business rates funding, but I will definitely and happily work with it because everybody wants better accessibility across the whole of our rail and tube networks.

Question put and agreed to.

6.30 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 10 March 2020

[JAMES GRAY *in the Chair*]

Post Office Network

9.30 am

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the post office network.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I was tempted to add to the motion this morning so that it read, "That this House has considered the post office network while we still have it." In 2017, Citizens Advice found that people value having a post office in the local community more than a local pub, bank branch or library. Sixty-two per cent. of small businesses—more than 2 million—use them at least once a month, and in rural areas post offices are vital, with 36% of rural businesses using them at least weekly.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way so early in her speech. I congratulate her on securing the debate. She mentioned bank branches in rural areas, but in lots of constituencies—in hers as much as in mine, I am sure—only one or two banks are left, so the post offices are the true infrastructure that residents now rely on for getting access to cash and general banking services. Does she agree that if more post offices close, whole communities will be cut off, with some people having to travel many miles to find additional banking services? We really cannot afford that.

Marion Fellows: The hon. Gentleman makes a vital point, which I will cover later.

Post offices matter to everyone. We are not all digitally inclined. We are not all able to access digital services online, and the poorest and most vulnerable people in our society are the ones who are most affected by post office closures.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. I agree entirely with what she is saying. In my constituency of Torfaen, post office branches have survived by going into other businesses—into chains or independent businesses. Does she agree that where contracts are in place for that to happen and circumstances lead to change, those post offices need to be supported and the contracts kept under review?

Marion Fellows: Absolutely. In constituency business, I too have heard of people taking on a post office in their existing business and being told that it is the new nirvana and things will only get better, but it is the existing customers who use the post office service in the shop, and there is no huge increase in turnover. It is important that post offices branch out. Longer opening hours are welcomed by many, but the whole point is to keep post office services available right across the regions and across all areas.

Rural businesses are more likely to use post offices to send deliveries and pay bills, and twice as likely to use them to withdraw or deposit cash. As hon. Members have said, banks are closing, so post offices become even more vital.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. The decrease in the number of banks and post offices in our constituencies is of significant concern to local people. There is a real problem in terms of access to cash, which is particularly pressing for elderly and more vulnerable constituents.

Marion Fellows: Absolutely. I was outside Wishaw post office, which was temporarily shut, when a disabled constituent came to get her benefits. She did not have enough money to get on the bus to go to the next post office, which is a fair distance away. She could not have walked. She had to phone her daughter to come and collect her to take her to access cash. This is 2020 and that is still happening. People need cash. In a previous debate in this room, the then Chair of the Treasury Committee gave a forensic and detailed account of how post offices let down local people if they close, because access to cash is still vital to the most vulnerable people and to all of us. Most of the taxi drivers in my constituency do not accept cards, and that is the case across the UK. We cannot force people. The Government should not try, through Post Office Ltd, to force people to go down the digital and no-cash route.

Scotland is being hardest hit by the postmaster crisis across the UK. Although since 2009 post office numbers have remained reasonably constant, last year they fell by 1%, and since the early 1980s the number of post offices has almost halved.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for securing this debate. When I speak to my local postmasters, one concern I hear is about the nature of the contract that they are supposed to take on. The length of hours requires them to keep extra staff at the tills. Will she join me in questioning the Minister about the terms of the contract and what is expected of sub-postmasters to make the services as feasible and as affordable as possible?

Marion Fellows: That will be one of my asks of the Minister. I have numerous asks, which might not surprise those present.

The Scottish post office network has the highest number of temporarily closed branches or temporary operators in the UK. Figures from Post Office Ltd show that of 1,016 temporarily closed branches, 134 are in Scotland, representing 13% of all temporarily closed branches; 52 of the 315 branches run by a temporary operator are in Scotland. Temporary postmasters step in when a postmaster leaves and a permanent postmaster cannot be found. This is becoming more and more common. People do not want to take on post offices in the present climate because of the difficulties involved.

The Tories' continued refusal to support postmasters and the post office network particularly affects Scottish communities. I am sure other Members will testify to the importance of post offices in their own nations and constituencies. Some have already done so by intervention.

[*Marion Fellows*]

What does the Minister propose to do about it? If she sees it as a matter for Post Office Ltd, will she ask it what it intends to do about it?

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this debate, which resonates throughout all our nations. The post office in Blaydon's shopping centre closed some years ago, and the Post Office has been unable to find anyone to take it on. Does she agree with me that post offices are absolutely central to the health of our high streets and that the Government must adopt a more flexible approach to supporting the opening or reopening of post offices?

Marion Fellows: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I totally agree with her. I learnt about the circular flow of income and cash many years ago. If we cannot withdraw money from the post office, we cannot nip next door to the baker's and buy a bun or a loaf of bread, and the baker cannot use it to pay staff. Things come to a halt. It is basic economics, or economics 101 as it is now referred to.

Communication Workers Union officials have also queried the wisdom of closing Crown post offices—those directly managed by Post Office Ltd—given that the company is profit making. The union notes that franchising causes people to leave the service because jobs advertised by firms such as WH Smith, which holds a very large number of franchises, are lower paid than those at the post office. Last year's decision to turn 74 Crown post offices into franchises in WH Smith stores is also alarming, particularly given reports that franchising is being done without consultation with the existing local post offices, meaning the competition risks destabilising the network further. I believe we heard from the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) in a previous debate that that happened in York. The Crown post office was closed, put out to franchise, and opened next to an already franchised smaller post office branch.

There must be more consultation and strategic consideration on franchising. That is a particular concern of the all-party parliamentary group on post offices, whose chair, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), is in the Chamber. Last year, the Post Office's director of sales and trade marketing stated that it has no contingency plan in the event that WHSmith, which has experienced 14 consecutive years of sales decline, collapses. If WHSmith collapses, what will happen to the Crown post offices? We must ensure that further franchising happens only in consultation with other businesses.

The UK Government must provide more incentives for new postmasters to open post offices that are independent of major chain shops. Will the Minister look at that and instruct Post Office Ltd accordingly? It is appalling that this year the majority of sub-postmasters earned less than the minimum wage for running a post office. The pay increase announced in November will not take place until next month. It is vital that the Minister acts to ensure that profits are not increased at the cost of a cut to postmasters' pay, forcing permanent post offices to close. Will the Minister take urgent action to review the sub-postmaster contract introduced in 2012? I think I can safely say that it is no longer fit for purpose.

The National Federation of SubPostmasters has raised sub-post office closures with the UK Government and the Government-owned Post Office Ltd. A spokesman said:

"Our records show around two-thirds of closures are due to the resignation of the sub-postmaster".

The spokesman pointed to low pay as the prime reason, saying that:

"This is a particular problem for rural areas in Scotland, as well as across the UK, where people rely on their local post office for vital postal and banking services."

Last year, an NFSP survey warned that one in five towns could lose its post office in the next year. Surveying a thousand workers found that 22% are planning to close, pass on the business or downsize staff. Sub-postmasters have been forced to go without holidays and take on extra jobs to make ends meet.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): We often find in situations such as the one in Loanhead in my constituency, where the Bank of Scotland is completely abandoning the community by shutting the bank branch, that the Post Office is expected to step in. We are very fortunate to have an excellent post office in the community that is willing to do so, but those increased pressures surely contribute to stress for postmasters, which adds to the points that my hon. Friend made about the potential for closure. If post offices close, what then for our communities, where the post office has been the final vestige, picking up the pieces after the bank has abandoned them?

Marion Fellows: I totally agree. The crux of the matter is that if we allow things to continue as they are, there will be a continual and continuous decline in the post office network until it reaches a tipping point and is no longer viable. We will all lose out, but the most vulnerable in our society will be affected the most.

In 2019, it was announced that from April sub-postmasters will receive better financial remuneration from Post Office Ltd for key banking services that they provide to the public. At the NFSP annual conference, Post Office Ltd announced that it will raise the rates. That is great—it will be a threefold increase—but we must ask ourselves why the Post Office felt the need to do that and why it was not done earlier. A local sub-postmaster came to me and said that he was getting the grand rate of £1.88 an hour for dealing with cash intake to his branch. He will feel much better that he will get more money, but post offices are taking the place of banks, and that is not always right.

I was part of a group of Scottish National party MPs who tried to ensure that banking service provision is properly remunerated. To be fair, the issue was also raised by Members from other parties. I raised the issue at Prime Minister's questions, and my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) raised it during an Adjournment debate that he led last year. If people think that I sound repetitive, it is because I am being repetitive. Since I came to this place, five Ministers have been in place; today's Minister is the sixth to have responded to a debate on post offices in which I have spoken. That cannot go on.

We welcome the changes that are happening, but it is vital that the details prove sufficient to protect postmasters' livelihood and the network. Further improvements are

needed to help to future-proof sub-postmasters' business. The announced measures must not be the end of Post Office Ltd's actions.

Kirsten Oswald: My hon. Friend is making a persuasive speech about the importance of post offices to our communities. She is hitting the nail on the head: it is about the service being sustainable. These services are at the heart of our communities. In East Renfrewshire, people in both rural and suburban communities are extremely concerned that post office services are no longer available to them. It is having a significant impact on their daily lives.

Marion Fellows: I totally agree. Across the House, in all the debates that we have had, there has been consensus and unanimity about what needs to be done. Time and again, folk have urged the Government to take action; many Members present have attended many such debates, and I welcome some new Members too. The Government have sat on their hands and done very little to improve post office network viability.

The National Federation of SubPostmasters said in November:

"It is imperative that we anticipate and adapt to future changes in the marketplace to ensure that subpostmasters are equipped and incentivised to grow their footfall and income. That is the only way we will be able to guarantee the long-term success of the overall business. This year we have looked to stabilise, next year and beyond we can look to sustain and grow."

Sub-postmasters cannot do that on their own. They need support from Post Office Ltd and the Government, who are the single shareholder in that business.

There are major questions about the handling and oversight of the Post Office by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, under its various guises, over decades. The Department has failed post offices, and change is needed. For example, in 2016-17 the former chief executive officer, Paula Vennells, received a major pay increase, while postmasters took a pay cut. At a time when the network is damaged, that seems unwise. I might even put it slightly more strongly than that. I asked the previous Minister for postal affairs for an independent review into postmaster pay. I know I have said this already, but I will keep saying it: we want a review. Will the Minister commit to one?

I will talk briefly about the Horizon cases. We had a debate in Westminster Hall on Thursday, during which we heard some appalling stories. The Horizon scandal is not just the fault of this Government; it has been going on for years, under Labour and under the Lib Dems in coalition. I do not want to make it a party-political issue. Mistakes have been made and they need to be rectified. We cannot just say that a big boy or a big girl did it and ran away. It does not matter who caused it. This is the point that we are at, and we have to move forward and secure a future for our post offices. I do not care who does it; I just want it done, and so do my constituents.

The Minister was in the Chamber last Thursday, when the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) led the debate on the Horizon scandal and its impact on postmasters and post office workers. We heard of appalling cases of injustice in which victims were imprisoned, were given community service, or lost homes, businesses and reputations. Victims were pressurised into paying

money to Post Office Ltd to avoid criminal charges, even when they knew they had done nothing wrong. Post Office Ltd covered up what it knew about the Horizon system and recklessly spent public money trying to avoid blame. The Minister's response to all of this was lacklustre.

As I have said, since I was elected almost five years ago, I have faced five Ministers—as of today, six—in an effort to get Tory Governments to understand the importance of post offices and those who run them and work in them. I feel as though I have been battering my head off a brick wall, but rest assured that I will continue to fight for our post offices, alongside colleagues from across the House, because our communities need them. Victims of the Horizon scandal must be recompensed. Will the Minister meet Post Office Ltd to ensure that those who run and work in our post offices will not be the ones who pay the price for this scandal?

The Government once said that the Post Office should be the "front office" for Government services. Is the Minister still committed to that, and is she aware that the BEIS post office subsidy, which is paid to Post Office Ltd to ensure there is funding to maintain post office networks in rural locations, has tapered off? The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee's inquiry into the post office, which was published in October last year, said:

"A re-think of how the Post Office is being funded for its role in supporting wider social and community goals is urgently required. This includes valuing the sub-postmasters and Post Office staff who deliver the services. It means making the Post Office a key channel for Government to reach customers. It requires ensuring that the Post Office brand continues to maximise opportunities with commercial partners, such as the banks and Royal Mail, so fees can be reinvested into the network and sub-postmasters fairly paid. Finally, it requires creative thinking on how the Post Office can continue its social purpose and maintain the high regard in which it is held by the communities it serves."

A national post office network provides an essential public service. I do not think this Government and previous Governments get that; they do not understand that although many of us Members will go months before we cross the threshold of a post office, that is not how it works for the majority of our constituents. I have talked a lot about rural areas, but my constituency, in which I live, is an urban constituency, and a number of post offices have closed in Motherwell and Wishaw. Two Crown post offices have closed, numerous post offices closed in 2010 or thereabouts, and thereafter there has been a continual drip, drip, drip of closures and postmasters handing back keys. To provide that essential public service, a national post office network needs Government subsidy. The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee has expressed concern about what will happen if the network subsidy payment that supports the operating costs of the post office network is withdrawn after 2021. The Committee said it was concerned that

"the PO and many sub-postmasters and retailers who run POs will not be able to fill the gap in funding with other revenues. Many sub-postmasters are already struggling and thinking of leaving their POs and the removal of £50 million in subsidies could tip many over the edge. It could also convince some retailers and retail chains who host POs that it is no longer viable. This would have a damaging effect on the PO network. It should be avoided at all costs."

I agree with all of that.

[*Marion Fellows*]

That Select Committee report was published in October 2019, but I do not think it has gone anywhere. We have had an election, which has represented another step back. There has not been a continuous push from Government to do what is needed, and although I understand that the general election had an effect, we need the Government to take up the reins again. What is the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee doing an inquiry on this morning? Post offices—isn't that strange? That only underlines the importance of the post office network. If I do just one thing today, I want to convince the Minister that this is so important that we require something other than platitudes and warm words from Government. If I can do that, I will feel that I have at least done something.

Liz Saville Roberts: The hon. Lady is making a powerful point. Does she agree that it is concerning that the Government seem to be prioritising digital by default? In effect, that means prioritising the banks that are able to make more money—increasing those banks' profits—over the needs of many of our vulnerable constituents who will never be able to access digital or who may prefer, for very good reasons, to manage their own finances through cash.

Marion Fellows: I said earlier that there was unanimity across this Chamber, and there is. I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention, and of course I agree with her.

It is really important that the Government and the Minister give us some surety that they are still pushing, in the spending review, for this subsidy to continue; I have already described the costly effects that might occur if it does not. A number of Government services are disappearing from our post offices; for instance, the Government have put post offices at a severe disadvantage when it comes to applications for passports. Why is it much cheaper to apply online? I remember that when I applied for my first ever passport, I filled in the form wrong three times. The nice lady in the Crown post office in Wishaw sent me back and told me to fill it in again. I was a teacher then, and I was busy—I could make all sorts of excuses—but I would not have got that passport if she had not said, “No, do this and this.” Of course, being me, I had left it until the last minute. I had three young children, a full-time job and a husband who thought that going on holiday just meant not working for two weeks. That is the kind of vital social service that post offices provide.

I have spoken about this issue to other Members on many occasions. One Welsh Member, who is not here today, told me about the valuable service that his mother's local post office used to give her when she went in. Because the postmaster knew her PIN, he helped her to get her money out and to put it into different pockets for different things, and really just helped her along. Postmasters in my own constituency have told me that they feel hamstrung now. They cannot provide the kind of service that they used to, simply because they have so little time. They are trying so hard to make money to live on that they cannot spend the time that they used to with their more vulnerable customers.

Is the Minister aware that since October 2019, the Post Office card account has no longer been available to new claimants and pensioners? There has been an invidious, insidious attack on the Post Office card account for a number of years. In 2015, a local sub-postmaster came to me with a very official-looking letter from the Department for Work and Pensions addressed to a constituent. It said, more or less in these words, “You must have a bank account in order to get your benefits and your pension.” For years, the Post Office card account has been used successfully by pensioners and claimants. They could go into their trusted local post office and draw money out on it without having to worry about having a bank card and going overdrawn, or about the difficulty of setting up a bank account. Many people do not have a passport or a driving licence, and they have never had a bank account and find it difficult to open one. The Post Office card account was ideal for those people, but now it is gone. Are there any plans to bring it back?

Kirsten Oswald: I appreciate my hon. Friend's generosity in giving way. My constituents have raised the same issues with me. If the Post Office card account has to end, it would be useful to hear what measures the Minister plans to put in place so that people who need to use that kind of account are not disadvantaged by the creeping closure of post offices in our communities.

Marion Fellows: I agree with my hon. Friend that that all matters. I am an old person—[HON. MEMBERS: “No!”] I know everyone is shaking their head in amazement. I understand this issue. People who have been using those accounts should be able to continue to do so, and that seems to be happening. Those who are retiring later, thanks to other Government plans, should still be able to go into their post office and use it as others have been able to. Post offices are the focus and the heart of any town or small community, or anywhere rural.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The hon. Member makes an important point about people who are not digitally enabled, particularly older or disabled people. Does she agree that the closure of post offices also disadvantages small business owners, who frequently use post offices to collect and post parcels, and that that affects local economies?

Marion Fellows: I absolutely agree. When the Crown post office in Motherwell closed, one of the biggest lobbying efforts I had was from small business owners who could nip into Motherwell town centre to deposit their cash. With the closure of different banks, they now struggle and have to find somewhere else. The Motherwell Crown post office became a small retail business with two counters instead of six. That post office used to have queues out of the door at certain times of the week, and the town centre benefited from people withdrawing and spending cash. That does not happen now, because although the post office does an excellent job—I have used it—it does not have the required capacity.

The CWU has raised the loss of service and expertise that can occur when post offices are taken over by chains such as WHSmith. The employees are TUPE-ed over, but within a year their pay is cut and they leave, so the business no longer has the expertise to help and serve communities when they need it.

The Minister has been taking note of all my asks, and I hope that she will respond positively. Rest assured that if she does not, I will be back, along with many of the hon. Members who are present. I look forward to yet another debate about post offices in the main Chamber on 19 March, thanks to the work of the all-party parliamentary group on post offices, of which I am a proud member.

10.3 am

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I agree with the powerful opening remarks of the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) and thank her for securing the debate. Other hon. Members have made important points about the significance of post offices for local communities and town centres, which I will focus on.

A tsunami of post offices and post office counters were lost in my constituency after 2011. We then had 10 post office counters—no Crown post office—of which we have lost three in the three years since 2017. The most important served Brentford high street, where the community has doubled in the past 10 years, to roughly 10,000 to 15,000 households.

The post office counter was in a shop in the middle of the town centre, where many buses passed. It served a large population and a large number of small businesses. There was a one-year notice period during which everyone knew that the parade building in which the post office was situated had to be emptied because it was due for redevelopment, so the post office could not remain in the premises. The building has subsequently been demolished. It also happened that the postmaster decided that he did not want to carry on the business, which is an issue in itself.

The good news is that a couple of months from now—18 months after the post office counter closed, during which time we have had no service in the whole of Brentford—we will get a new counter at Costcutter on the high street. We will have had 18 months without a service that many people feel is vital. We could have avoided the gap, because the Post Office, the local authority, I as the MP and the local councillors knew that there was a need to find new premises and probably a new postmaster. The Post Office sought applications, but in the first round there were only two applicants from the many businesses and organisations in Brentford that could have opened a counter. Neither fitted the criteria, so there was another application round. I am not sure whether Costcutter tipped over the bar in that round and was accepted or whether there was a third round.

Why are people not applying for or retaining counters? As the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw and other hon. Members have mentioned, it is because the margins are so slim, the pay is too low, the requirements for only a qualified person to cover the post office counter make it restrictive in terms of leave and sickness, the increase in robberies and violence makes retail businesses physically risky, and the Horizon project has damaged the Post Office's reputation. What is the Post Office doing about that? I understand that it has an element of a public sector duty as a fully Government-owned company that, as we all see, provides essential public services.

In my correspondence and meetings with the Post Office, frankly, I have found it very passive. I have received no coherent response from it or the former Minister—I have not had a chance to speak to the current Minister about it. From the response, it feels as though the Post Office is passive. A Post Office representative told me yesterday that, "If no one applies, what can we do about it?" That is not a proactive response from an important Government-overseen operation.

The Post Office access criteria require

"99% of the UK population to be within three miles of their nearest post office outlet"

and

"95% of the total urban population across the UK to be within one mile of their nearest post office outlet",

but that does not make a lot of sense if the community, or the place that people can get to by bus, does not have a post office. There is a post office just over a mile from Brentford, but people cannot get there by bus and there is nowhere to park anywhere near it, because it is a tiny little shop. We should have one in Brentford town centre. The Post Office should recognise that. I have now been told that the Post Office has realised that Brentford is a priority and should have a main post office, but why did it not think Brentford was a priority two years ago, when we knew that there was going to be an issue?

I ask the Minister and the Post Office to work together to address the public sector duty and deliver a core service in all town centres, which we could define. We could use the PTAL—public transport accessibility level—grading used in planning to define the criteria for the quality of public transport access, parking and so on. We could also look at grants and the transaction costs.

The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw talked about business declining in the Post Office's core services, which is true, because many people use services online that they used to go to the post office for, but where is the Post Office looking at new business nationally, such as basic banking and new opportunities? Where is the entrepreneurial spirit to combine the best of private sector entrepreneurialism and new technology with the public sector duty—in a sense, the Government-perceived monopoly for services?

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the hon. Member agree that part of the problem is that successive Governments have not looked at those issues? They seem to perceive the Post Office as a business of the '90s and 2000s, rather than one for the current and future generations.

Ruth Cadbury: The hon. Member expresses exactly my feelings about dealing with the Post Office—it is passive; it is backward-looking; it is old-fashioned. There is an inherent benefit to post offices, both in terms of their brand reputation and the legal governance position.

The Post Office has a new chief executive, who has been in post for just six months. My understanding is that it will soon release a strategic review about its role. I am looking forward to hearing positive, forward-looking answers to my concerns, so that my constituency and

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

my town centre, like so many villages, town centres, suburbs and towns, is served properly by this important, Government-owned, public service.

10.10 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for setting the scene so well. She is absolutely right; we have been here so many times on this issue. I hope that we do not have to return to it, but we all know we probably will. We hope that the Minister will give us the reassurance that we so desperately desire—I am glad to see her back in the House and congratulate her on her new ministerial role.

I am always concerned when I see a debate on post offices surfacing, as it gives me concern that there has been another round of culls as we are seeing with the banks, but I am thankful that that is not what I am facing in Strangford today. I have had a very good working relationship with the Post Office. On almost every occasion we have been able to find a solution, and I will refer to some of them later.

At the end of March yet another bank will close in Newtownards—this time it is the Barclays bank. Barclays has agreed to meet me about that. I am concerned about bank closures, as I know other colleagues are. Indeed, one of today's early-day motions is about the closure of a Clydesdale Bank branch in Scotland. I think 10 banks have closed in my constituency, and I am concerned about the effect of those losses on communities. Hailing as I do from a mixed rural-urban constituency, I am very aware that local post offices are a necessity.

The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw referred to the debate in Westminster Hall last Thursday on post offices and the Horizon system. Some of the stories about the impact on people's quality of life, health, finances and some of the implications we heard were horrendous. Something that came out of that debate was the cross-party, cross-political opinion that something has to be done—it is needed desperately. I believe that the opinion is the same today.

Post offices play a crucial economic and social role in our local and rural communities. One in five people face isolation if rural post offices close. Eight in 10 small businesses in remote rural areas would lose money if local post offices were closed and, nationally, there are more post offices than there are bank branches of all the banks combined.

The banks that have closed in my constituency are mostly Ulster Bank, alongside Danske Bank, Bank of Ireland and Allied Irish, and now we have the Barclays bank closing. Credit unions have filled some of the gaps and have done an excellent job, but they cannot be expected to fill it all. New credit unions have opened in Kircubbin and there is also an active credit union in Newtownards, which is doing exceptionally well. The Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), had the opportunity to come over to Northern Ireland to visit that credit union, so he is well aware of its good work. The Irish credit unions and the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions have tried to bridge some of those gaps.

The Countryside Alliance has said:

“The post office network offers an important means of accessing cash, either using its own financial products or because it provides access to the current accounts of 20 other banks and the business accounts of 8 other banks.”

The expansion of financial services through post offices could replace lost banking and financial services to rural communities and small businesses, ensuring the long-term viability of the network and that the post office remains at the centre of rural community life.

There are currently 491 open post offices in Northern Ireland; 314 of them, or 63%, are classed as rural. In my constituency of Strangford there are 22 currently open post offices and 72% are classed as rural. That says it all. I have worked alongside the Post Office and we have been able to integrate post offices into shops in the constituency quite well. That has been successful in Carrowdore, Greyabbey, Kircubbin, Ballyhalbert, Portaferry, Ballynahinch and in two or three places in Newtownards, in Comber and elsewhere. That has worked because it is about knowing the community. The people who have been interested in retaining the post office have accommodated that within their shops, and have thereby ensured that the post office continues to be an important part of community life.

Mr Gregory Campbell: I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend on his grand tour of his Strangford constituency, but does he agree that in many rural areas in the regions and nations of the United Kingdom, what he has outlined is what has happened in the past few years—small post offices have been incorporated into shops and have developed services? That needs to be promoted more to retain and develop the network.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for his wise words. I agree that that has been a success story. Perhaps the Minister will be able to confirm in her response whether that is happening in other parts of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland as well.

There is now no longer a bank the entire way down the Ards peninsula. It is the post office that enables not only pensioners but local workers and stay-at-home parents to access banking and their funds. The importance of that to a community cannot be overstated.

The Post Office has highlighted to me that it has consistently met all five national access criteria; at the end of March 2019, 99.7% of the population lived within three miles of a post office—that is probably true in my constituency—and 92.7% lived within one mile. Post offices are very much an integral core part of village life, rural life and community life.

In addition, there are legal access targets to ensure that at least 95% of the population of every postcode district are within six miles of their nearest post office. It was found on 31 March 2018 that that criterion was not met in seven postcode districts. I am informed that as of 31 March 2019 there were three postcode districts that did not meet that criteria, and they are being worked on. Good work has been done, but other Members have referred to the importance of post offices and there are anomalies that need to be addressed. The post office network is attempting to fill the gap left by the rural bank branches—an extra burden that it is doing its best to address. That should be welcomed and further secured with clear signals from the Government.

I echo the calls of the Countryside Alliance to deliver on three key issues, which I hope the Minister can respond on. The Post Office and banks need to standardise banking services offered over the post office counter. Post offices must remain relevant in modern times through supporting growth in activities such as online shopping through parcel collection and delivery, and to continue to pick up the slack as banks and shops close in rural areas. There should also be access to the banking protocol, to ensure that when a branch is moved or closed, customers are made aware of the banking services offered by the nearest post office. It is crucial that post offices are an option that people can fall back on whenever banks close. That has happened in my constituency and I would like to see it happen in other constituencies as well.

We are slowly but surely moving into a situation where someone who does not have broadband of a decent speed will be isolated from their finances as well as other services, and not every person has access to online services. Our post offices are the last line of defence and we need to stand with them to defend this last bastion against rural social isolation.

10.19 am

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to hear your Glasgow accent in the Chair, Mr Gray.

James Gray (in the Chair): I have lost most of it.

Gavin Newlands: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for securing the debate, and I commend her for all the work she is doing on this important issue. As she mentioned, the SNP pushed hard for the banking industry to provide a fair price for banking transactions over post office counters, because the rate was simply unsustainable. I am glad that a substantial increase was agreed; it is only right, given that in many places the banks are completely reliant on the Post Office to deliver their services. I am delighted that that has been resolved.

One thing that unites Members of different parties—I say that despite the lack of Tory Back Benchers present—is the future of our post offices in our constituencies and local communities. My constituency has 14 post offices and each is vital to its communities, from Ferguslie Park to Bishopton, Gallowhill to Houston, and Linwood to Bridge of Weir—I thought that I, too, would go on a tour of my constituency.

The post office in Bridge of Weir is an example of a community seeing the real value that a post office provides to the village and working hard to secure it. It was closed in 2011 but, through the hard work of the local community, The Bridge charity was set up to take over the former library and repurpose it as the village's post office and community centre, with a peppercorn rent from the council. From day one, however, the charity faced an uphill struggle. Its income runs at barely half of that projected by the post office, knocking the projections that the trustees made completely out of kilter. It is a matter of some anger that the post office did not qualify for community status due to the proximity of other post offices in other villages, even though Bridge of Weir public transport links can be charitably described as patchy.

Any closure of the post office would result in substantial inconvenience for service users and the wider community, which has a significantly older than average demographic. The Bridge is able to keep the post office only through cross-subsidisation of counter trade by the associated retail unit, which provides a fairly narrow retail offer in order not to conflict with any other retail operations in the village. That cannot be sustainable without a real change to the criteria by which local community post offices qualify for additional support. It is simply preposterous that every other shop in the village would have to close and lie empty before this community asset becomes eligible for consideration for the Post Office funding streams.

In the last few months Post Office Ltd has provided a one-off grant to support The Bridge. If it recognises that need, ongoing support should certainly be offered to The Bridge. I have discussed this issue with the previous Minister; if she will allow, I hope to discuss it with the new Minister. I hope that she will take away what I and many other Members are saying, and that she speaks to the Post Office about amending the criteria to introduce more flexibility—we need a bit of common sense in designating the units of the network that need support.

Post offices such as that in Bridge of Weir, and in thousands of communities across the country, need real support and recognition from the UK Government that they are not just places to collect pensions and post birthday presents; they are the lifeblood of places that have had facilities taken away from them over the years. Sadly, we know that our postmasters have been poorly served by the Post Office and its management.

The Horizon IT fiasco is not just a damning indictment of the Post Office management and its inability to resolve problems competently; it is a devastating judgment on the “Upstairs, Downstairs” culture that seems to pervade the organisation. Dozens of victims have had their livelihood and liberty stripped from them at the behest of management, who denied for nearly two decades that there was any problem at all. We now know that there was a problem entirely of the Post Office's making, which has cost a high price, and not just financially; the human victims will never get back the weeks and months they have wrongly spent behind bars, and families will never get their loved ones back.

My constituent was convicted of fraud and sentenced to 13 months. Her life was turned upside down. She lost her marriage and house as a result. No level of compensation is adequate for the damage that Horizon has done to her life. That episode demonstrates the fundamental cultural issues within the Post Office management that need to be addressed, and it highlights the lack of governmental oversight that led to that management culture.

For too long the Post Office has been treated like an old armchair: too useful to throw out, but unloved, battered and kept out of obligation rather than enthusiasm. I wish the Minister well in her new role, but that attitude has to change if we want a post office network that is fit for the remaining years of the 21st century. That attitude left some sub-postmasters living below minimum wage earnings due to the paltry sums paid to them to maintain a link in the post office network, and it has left the Bridge of Weir post office continually fighting for its future rather than receiving the support it deserves.

[Gavin Newlands]

We need recognition from the Government that a post office is more than the sum of its parts. It is a vital cog in our society and communities that helps to bind us together, and it cannot be yet another piece of social cohesion that is left to be stripped away by the mantra of market forces.

10.25 am

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing the debate and on her earnest plea that post offices matter. They absolutely do. In each and every contribution to the debate, we have heard about many of the different ways in which post offices matter to our various communities and sections of them. My hon. Friend made a clear call for the sub-postmasters' contract to be reviewed, and she pointed out that we need creative thinking about how the business model develops. It is a call with which I heartily concur.

I very much enjoyed the contribution from the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), who spoke eloquently about the difficulty of maintaining the visibility of the service, about some of the problems with security and about the locations of people who are willing to take on the service, which are not always the locations where, in an ideal world, we would wish the service to be transacted. She made those points very well.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke eloquently about the issues in his constituency, but he got right to the nub of it when he spoke of the post office as a core part of village and rural life. He hit the nail firmly on the head. My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) spoke of the importance of a good and effective public transport network in ensuring continued access to the network, and he said that the service is beyond the dictates of market forces. Again, I heartily concur.

Let us look at some of the positive aspects of our post offices. A survey conducted in 2017 showed that 81% of respondents described the post office as important to them; 49% described it as very or extremely important and 97% described it as trustworthy—an unprecedented high figure. That shows the tremendous standing of the institution of the post office, which is not something that has been created in a marketer's sketchbook. It is a reputation that has been built up over generations of much-valued service to individuals and communities, with a high-quality service at its very heart. The post office is at the heart of both urban and rural communities, and it has provided a universal service and common experience that we have come to value, wherever we are from.

We all understand that changes in the ways that people wish to access the services offered at post offices are inevitable. There is always a temptation to try to take everyone down the route of digital by default, regardless of whether we have the technological capability and sufficiency of broadband access, or the willingness or personal ability, to do that. We have to recognise that digital is not the default for many people, nor will it

ever be. It should not be the default for accessing post office services, and we must not overlook the vital role that post offices provide not just to individuals, but to local businesses.

My hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw referred to economics 101 and the importance of the circular flow of cash. That is of particular importance as many banks retreat from our communities and, in many cases, the availability of ATMs in our communities is dramatically reduced. That retreat affects not only rural communities, but urban communities. Lack of access to cash is particularly felt in some of the less affluent urban communities, where the post office's presence as a provider of cash is vital.

In addition to ensuring the flow of cash, enabling it to be spent locally is important. Many post offices are located within retail businesses in the area, and they also provide direct support to other businesses on the high street. More than 2 million small businesses, or 62%, use the post office at least once a month. In rural areas, 36% of rural businesses use the post office at least once a week to receive deliveries, send products, pay bills and, with the banks retreating from the high street, to deposit cash, as the post office increasingly—willingly or otherwise—takes on the role of cash handler of last resort in many locations.

The network could certainly fulfil that task, but we have to proceed with caution. We must recognise that many post offices simply do not have the physical security to handle large amounts of cash, and that many sub-postmasters are perhaps unwilling to take on a task that carries an increased risk of crime. Although my SNP colleagues and I would very much like to stem the banks' retreat from the high street, it is important that if and when they do retreat, they are held financially to their responsibility to support the transition and ensure that the post office network is suitably equipped to take on that role, should that be what we want to happen.

Owen Thompson: On the point about the need for banks to have long-term contact with the post offices that step in where a bank has abandoned the community, does my hon. Friend agree that the postmasters in those post offices will have to pick up the pieces if that long-term connection does not happen? Months or even years down the line, when customers find themselves in a situation and the banks are long gone, the postmasters will have to pick up the pieces.

Richard Thomson: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. When a service of that kind is withdrawn, the transition is rarely seamless, as I have seen in my constituency, where banks have withdrawn and even post offices have reluctantly had to close. There is always a hiatus and an interruption in service, and it is difficult to quantify the degradation in that function that people experience as behaviour changes.

It is not difficult to map out a socially useful and sustainable future for the Post Office. Each of us has spoken at length about the socially useful role that it serves. The challenge is to make that role sustainable for those who provide and operate those services. It should not come as any surprise that as the level of direct financial support to post offices has declined in recent years, there has been a similar decline in the number of post office businesses.

The foundation of a sustainable post office business has to lie in making the everyday transactions sustainable and worthwhile for postmasters to carry out. That aspect of the business is potentially profitable; in 2016, it made a £35 million trading profit. Post offices must continue to be the access point—or the front counter, as has been said—to Government and other public services for people for whom digital is not and will never be the default option.

Postmasters should be properly compensated for the role that we expect them to perform. My hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw made the excellent point that a review of the current contract is absolutely essential. I very much look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about that.

Although we need at least to maintain the network subsidy payment at its current level, we should also allow a new business model to develop. As I said, the Post Office has a trusted reputation, which it has used to leverage, grow and expand the business into areas such as telecoms and financial services. It should be allowed to expand its retail offering.

We have spoken about the Post Office's importance as a distributor, collector and mover of cash; it should be able to develop the Post Office Money side of the business. We have heard about the constraints put on the Post Office card account and about the access that the Post Office allows to business banking for eight banks and to personal banking for 20 banks. The Post Office must be allowed to develop and build revenue from its own offerings in current accounts, business accounts, credit cards, saving products, and domestic and international cash transfers. That will make the business sustainable.

The Post Office is a much-valued institution and service, but it runs increasingly on goodwill, which is not enough. I look forward to hearing the Minister set out her vision of the future of the service and how it can be made sustainable, not just in terms of goodwill, but in terms of the finances behind it.

10.35 am

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Gray. I congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing this important debate. She has played a key role in keeping the viability of the post office network in the minds of Ministers and the public. I have been pleased to work with her, the Communication Workers Union and many others on the important issues facing post offices across the country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) both spoke eloquently about their local issues, many of which are reflected throughout the country, particularly access to cash, the loss of community post offices and the plight of sub-postmasters, who are not adequately recompensed for the very important services they provide.

The Horizon trial and its fallout have clearly put the debate in a different context from last April's debate on the network. We have had opportunities to discuss Horizon, and there are more opportunities to come, but I appreciate that the subject of the debate is somewhat distinct from that. Some essential context from the trial

must be mentioned, though, with warnings from Post Office Ltd about the "existential threat" that the trial posed to the future of the company. The implication is that the financial consequences of the scandal may have an impact on the funding available to the network.

In the fight for justice for wronged sub-postmasters, we must not lose sight of the rest of the network. Ensuring that it is properly funded for the future is key. It is clear, even before we understand the full impact of the trial on the finances of Post Office Ltd later this year, that the network is hugely reliant on the network subsidy payment. The legal and compensation costs that the business will bear will make the Post Office hugely reliant on Government support.

The Government are hiding behind the idea that the Post Office is an independent commercial business, but the need for public support at critical moments means that the Government can and must play a far greater role in shaping the future of the Post Office, rather than simply providing credit and monitoring basic targets. In truth, since the separation of Post Office Ltd and Royal Mail, the Government have not taken their strategic role seriously. We have not had a comprehensive statement of strategic direction for that vital service since 2010, and we have reached the point where the long-term future of the network is at stake.

The Minister will undoubtedly argue that the numerous consultations, funding announcements and statements illustrate the Government's commitment to the Post Office's future direction, but none of those pronouncements sets out any real vision for the future. Many communities have already lost vital services because of closures by Post Office Ltd or, increasingly, because postmasters can no longer afford to run the services. The Government must set out a true long-term plan that details how post offices can thrive in a changing world. Without such a plan, the network will drift further towards a model of postal counters in larger multiples, as opposed to a network genuinely rooted in communities.

The growth of Crown post offices being delivered by WHSmith and others points towards a possible future in which the public elements of our post office network are continually reduced, so that it becomes a network led by larger private businesses. That is not the future of the network that the public want to see. In previous debates, I have highlighted many concerns about disabled access and adequate numbers of well-trained staff, which many of my constituents report to me and many other MPs.

By contrast, we have a clear vision of the future of the post office network. First, the network would receive far greater protection if it were reunified with Royal Mail in public control. The disastrous decision to split the two and to sell off Royal Mail threatened both businesses. As high streets and the postal market develops, we have missed great opportunities to unify the management and services of those businesses. Working together, post offices and Royal Mail delivery offices could provide a much more comprehensive network of local points from which to send and pick up parcels, driving growth and delivering sustainability for the Post Office and Royal Mail. Britain's post should be public.

Labour would also set up a proper post office bank to bring 21st-century banking services into every community. High street bank closures are happening across the country, and while many post offices work hard to

[Gill Furniss]

provide basic banking services on behalf of banks, they cannot offer many essential services that local bank branches can. Furthermore, the, thankfully, reversed decision by Barclays to withdraw its services from post offices shows that the existing relationship is neither sufficient nor stable. A post office bank, by contrast, would bring full banking services to every post office, meaning that people who value a local branch service would have reliable access to branches. Such a bank would offer a vital new line or remuneration for sub-postmasters, helping to protect them for the future.

Not only that, but smaller loans could be available through a post bank, enabling thousands of bottom-up transformational changes for start-ups, small businesses, local co-operatives and community projects in towns and villages up and down the country. A post bank would also be the location for much needed local business development support, further ensuring a sustainable customer base for post offices for generations to come. The proposal would also support the Post Office's key functions of making cash accessible. Many people, especially those who are vulnerable or elderly, rely on cash in their day-to-day lives, and bank branch closures mean post offices are one of the few places that it can be accessed free of charge. A strong local network of free-to-use cash machines also helps to support small local businesses, which may not have the facilities to accept other forms of payment, and provides a lifeline to our struggling high streets.

Will the Minister commit to bring forward a comprehensive strategy for the Post Office? I know that she will not agree with every element of the plan I have laid out, but the House and the public must be able to see and scrutinise the Government's plans for the future. Will she also set out what steps she will take to address the governance of the Post Office to ensure that sub-postmasters and the public are assured that the management of the company is able to take the network forward into the future with openness and transparency? Any strategy must identify the desperate need for fair remuneration of sub-postmasters, which will help to maintain a viable post office network, as highlighted by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), who fondly referred to the Post Office as an "unloved" armchair, which I found very touching.

The post office network is a national gem, valued by many up and down the country. It can provide a bulwark against a retail downturn and essential protection for the digitally excluded, but it must have the correct vision and investment to achieve that. In recent weeks, the Post Office has faced great challenges. The Government must react and lead the Post Office forward for the future.

10.44 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Amanda Solloway): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing this important debate on the Post Office. I was taking notes all the way through and sincerely hope that I manage to address many of the questions that have been asked. The Minister with responsibility for small business, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully)—he is

the fifth of the Ministers the hon. Lady referred to—would have been present but could not be here today. I assure the House that I will pass the messages on to him.

It is encouraging to see the shared passion we have for this vital asset—the post office network is, absolutely, a national treasure. I was delighted to hear the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) talk about new premises, and to hear the wise words of all Members—including the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), who described the post office network as a "national gem". I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his kind words. He is always incredibly kind to me, and what he said was lovely. It was great to hear his wise words. It was interesting to hear from the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson), who had positive things to say about the Post Office, and the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), who talked about the flexibility we have.

I assure the House that the Government fully understand that the Post Office is an organisation like no other. Post offices up and down the country contribute enormously to the life and soul of the community, providing convenient access to vital services and infrastructure that our constituents and businesses need to prosper. Since 2010, therefore, successive Governments have invested more than £2 billion to safeguard and modernise the post office network, to ensure that it is sustainable for the future.

I will address some of the specific questions asked by the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw. Since 2010, the Post Office has turned a corner, but colleagues should not take my word for that. In 2016, it became profitable for the first time in recent history, culminating in a pre-subsidy profit of £60 million in 2018-19. Winning new business has contributed to the improvement of the Post Office's official financial performance and, consequently, the Government funding required to sustain the uncommercial parts of the network has drastically decreased. The network transformation programme that took place from 2012 to 2018 enabled the modernisation of more than 7,000 branches, adding more than 200,000 opening hours per week and establishing the Post Office as the largest network trading on a Sunday.

A new chief executive officer was appointed in September 2019. He is committed to resetting the Post Office's national relationship with postmasters. One of the questions that the hon. Lady asked was about that relationship, and we will continue to ensure that it thrives.

In addition, rather than branches closing, the overall number of post offices grew by 91 in 2018-19, and 653 branches have opened as part of the new network locations programme, supporting our high streets and providing customers with a better and more accessible service while making the network more resilient. Furthermore, the Post Office's agreement with high street banks enables personal and business banking in all branches, providing vital access to cash and banking services for consumers, businesses and local economies while bank branch closures continue apace.

Post Office Ltd has taken further steps to incentivise prospective postmasters to take on a post office. That includes an increase to postmaster remuneration of 10%, year on year, in 2020-21. That is one of the questions you were asking—

James Gray (in the Chair): She!

Amanda Solloway: Apologies—that is one of the questions she was asking.

The hon. Lady asked about BEIS and Government oversight of the Post Office. BEIS has challenged the Post Office and, in fact, the new CEO and the chair personally to strengthen their relationship with postmasters and to take on board the lessons learned from the recent litigation. They have provided assurances that they will do so. BEIS has established, and chairs, a quarterly group with the National Federation of SubPostmasters and the Post Office.

The hon. Lady asked about Post Office card accounts. The POCA contract is a commercial matter for the Department for Work and Pensions and Post Office Ltd. It is no secret that the contract for the Post Office card account will come to an end on 30 November 2021, but the DWP is in the process of developing a replacement. The predecessor Minister with responsibility for small business, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), wrote to her ministerial colleagues in the DWP in full support of a full and open tender process to ensure the delivery of the best possible service to citizens and value for money.

I turn to franchising. There is a widespread misunderstanding that franchising is a closure programme, leading to redundancies and the deterioration of services for consumers, but that is not the case. I appreciate that the proposed changes to the delivery of post office services can cause concern in the communities affected, and that some constituents have a strong emotional attachment to directly managed branches and their staff. However, the franchising model has endured to this day, and the vast majority—more than 11,300 post offices—are successfully run on a franchise or agency basis with large and small retailers as part of a thriving business.

Since January 2020, the Post Office and Payzone network have become exclusive bill payment providers for British Gas, bringing more footfall for businesses and revenue for postmasters. Although it is important not to be complacent and to recognise the challenges ahead, I encourage Members to look closely and objectively at the facts, which show unequivocally that the network is more sustainable today than it was in 2010. All of that has been achieved notwithstanding the challenging trading conditions in the Post Office's core markets and the wider sector.

Delivering post office services as part of a wider retail offer is a proven model that brings benefits to the community, the local economy, postmasters, consumers and, ultimately, taxpayers. Let me reassure hon. Members that as part of its ongoing monitoring role, Citizens Advice will continue to track the impact of post office changes on consumers and customer satisfaction with franchised post offices. Citizens Advice also has a formal advisory role in reviewing changes to the Crown post offices across Great Britain that are relocated and franchised.

I note hon. Members' concerns about temporarily closed branches. Let me reassure the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw that Post Office Ltd is committed to maintaining the branch network, and there is no programme of closures.

Ruth Cadbury: Could the Minister explain, now or subsequently, how the Government wish to retain the network? Our experience is that it is not being maintained.

Amanda Solloway: If I do not answer the hon. Lady's question subsequently, I will provide her with a written answer.

There are more than 6,100 post offices in rural areas, and almost 99% of the rural population live within three miles of one of those branches. Illustrating the importance of post offices in those areas is the fact that almost half of rural post offices have community status, which means that they are the last shop in their village. When the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw referred to how she had been helped with a passport application, I was reminded that, many years ago, I was in exactly the same situation when I went to do my passport. The Post Office recognises the unique challenge of running a community branch, and it provides fixed as well as variable remuneration to reflect their special situation.

A question was asked about opening hours. The network transformation programme involved the announcement of more than 200,000 weekly opening hours and established the Post Office as the largest network trading on a Sunday. The Government fully understand the importance of access to cash, especially in the context of accelerated bank branch closures. That is why the industry-wide banking framework agreement between the Post Office and the high street banks is pivotal in ensuring convenient access to everyday banking services. The House will be glad to know that, as part of its review of postmaster remuneration, Post Office Ltd increased the fixed remuneration received by community status branches to ensure the long-term stability of the rural network.

On Horizon, which the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw asked about, I echo what my colleague Paul Scully MP said to the House: although the Government are pleased that a resolution to the Horizon group litigation has been reached, we do not take for granted the strength of feeling about the negative impact that the Horizon court case has had on postmasters. The Government recognise that this has been a difficult period for postmasters, who are at the heart of communities across the UK. Although the financial settlement in December 2019 and the Post Office's apology are significant steps in the right direction, there is still a lot that the Post Office needs to do to strengthen its relationship with postmasters and to regain public trust.

Let me reassure hon. Members that improvements at all levels of the organisation are well under way, reflecting the lessons learned from the past. Minister Scully has already spoken to the Post Office—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. I think the Minister means to refer to the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam. The Minister should not mention the name of the Member of Parliament.

Amanda Solloway: I apologise. The Minister has already spoken to the Post Office's newly appointed chief executive, and has been assured that a major overhaul of the Post Office's engagement and relationships with postmasters is progressing.

The Government will continue to monitor and proactively challenge the Post Office leadership and will hold it to account on its progress. The Department for Business,

[Amanda Solloway]

Energy and Industrial Strategy is looking at what more needs to be done, and it will outline the next steps in due course.

Mention has been made of postmaster relationships and remuneration; in 2019, after a six-month review of postmaster pay, Post Office Ltd announced an additional pay increase of £37 million per annum. A question was asked about subsidy payments; beyond 2020, Government remain committed to ensuring the long-term sustainability of the network with Post Office Ltd.

To conclude, let me reassure Members that Government recognise the value and importance of postmasters and post offices to communities, people and businesses in rural and urban parts of the UK. We will continue to safeguard the post office network to ensure that post offices can thrive at the heart of communities across the country. I thank hon. Members again for their contributions to this excellent debate and for their hard work supporting access to post office services for our constituents.

10.56 am

Marion Fellows: I thank everyone who has taken part in this debate, whether through interventions or speeches. I do not want the Minister to take this personally, because I could have said it innumerable times to many other Ministers, but we do not just want to hear kind words from the Government. We do not want the Government to say, “We will press Post Office Ltd”; we want the Government to tell us what they are going to do. That was missing quite a bit from the Minister’s response.

I want to pick up on one thing. It seems as though where the Government find that Post Office Ltd is making a profit, that is fine—everything in the garden is lovely; we are moving forward and the Post Office is doing really well, because it is making money—but how much money will the Post Office be making when the full cost of the Horizon scandal hits? It is not just about the people who have been taken to court and whose cases are going through the criminal court review procedures; it is about the people who paid the Post Office money because they did not want to be prosecuted, and who were harassed and harangued into doing that. It is about the cover-up. The Government cannot sit back and let the post office network flounder because of the great cost coming down the line for the Post Office as a result of Horizon.

That does not even cover things such as franchising. Franchising is not good. It has been proven, especially where Crown post offices are franchised, that franchising leads to expertise being lost: people leave, there is a reduction in the services provided and everyone loses out. I honestly hope that the inquiry that the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee is carrying out prods Ministers into effort and deeds, instead of kind words. Post offices need to be kept, and they need to prosper. We need them to support our communities.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the post office network.

Political Neutrality in Schools

10.59 am

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered political neutrality in schools.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I should declare some interests in this topic. I have two children of primary school age and my wife teaches. Clearly, I am also a Member of Parliament, and I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on education. The APPG plans to do some work on the mental health and wellbeing of our children in the classroom, which I will come to later.

We are fortunate in Somerset to have brilliant schools and teachers, and measures to level up funding for rural schools are welcome. As elsewhere, we need to ensure that support for special educational needs makes a difference for the children involved—that is something else I would like the APPG to focus on—but in general we have dedicated and highly professional teachers and support staff in our part of the country.

I did not seek the debate to suggest that classrooms are a hotbed of radicalisation. However, I have been approached by concerned parents—I am sure I am not the only Member in that position—about incidents, in the run-up to December’s general election and at other times, that I am told included the airing of strong and aggressive political views.

The issue received attention in the national press just before Christmas, when the musician Stormzy was criticised for telling a primary school class of seven-year-olds that the Prime Minister is “a bad, bad man” and, like the big bad wolf, would blow their houses down. That was not the first time Stormzy had attracted controversy. Given his previous homophobic rants on social media and the language and themes of his music, it is not unreasonable to question whether he was an appropriate guest at a primary school in the first place.

Stormzy—or Michael, to use his real name—has well-known political views. Most of us will have seen him getting the well-heeled crowd at Glastonbury hot under the collar with his support for Jeremy Corbyn, but those views do not belong in a primary school. I would say the same if he had a strong anti-Labour message; this issue is not about political parties, but about the abuse of a position of influence.

In the last few years we have seen a coarsening of our political debate. In too many cases, reasoned debate has given way to name calling and abuse. Politicians are thick skinned, and we are increasingly used to people firing abuse at us from the comfort of their own homes. Our young children, however, will not understand that, and they should not be asked to.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I am listening with care to the hon. Member. I absolutely agree that children, and particularly seven-year-olds, should not be subjected to the kind of language and approach that Stormzy was reported to have used, but is it not true that guest speakers who come into schools can be expected to be asked their political views? Certainly, whenever I go into schools I am asked what I think of the Prime Minister, of Brexit, of plastic and of climate change, and whether I have ever met the Queen. Is not

the issue more about the appropriateness of the speaker's response and the respect they give to the children and staff in the school than about their political position?

Mr Fysh: I will come on to some of those issues, but the hon. Lady makes some valid points.

One of the big challenges facing us generally is why children are more likely than ever before to suffer from stress or have mental health problems. That is partly due to better diagnosis, which is a positive step, but there has undoubtedly been a rise in the number of young people with high anxiety. The role of social media and mobile phones in that is for another time, but being exposed to aggressive tribal politics and told that the country is being run by a very bad man certainly is not going to help.

This area becomes more complex when we consider that we want our young people to be interested in and engaged with politics. At a time when anything can be researched at the click of a button and the number of sources on any given subject is rising exponentially, it is more important than ever that children are taught the skills to make reasoned assessments and form balanced opinions. I am sure many of today's politicians were inspired at school by certain teachers to choose the path of politics. The more people who choose to get involved and run for office, the better.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am surprised that it is necessary for my hon. Friend to raise this issue. In May 1986 a group of peers, led by Baroness Cox, successfully amended what was then the Education Bill to ensure that politically contentious material, if raised and discussed in schools, must be handled in a balanced way. In June 1986 the Government accepted that. My understanding is that that ban on political indoctrination has been carried forward in subsequent legislation, so I am surprised that this is even an issue today.

Mr Fysh: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. I hope my right hon. Friend the Minister will address some of those issues in his response to the debate.

Teachers often bring the same positive attributes to elected office that make them effective in the classroom. Many become councillors or Members of Parliament, and our democratic institutions are richer for having them, along with the skills and insights into education that they contribute. Whether they should remain in education while they do so, however, is a valid question.

There may be no straightforward formula for how to inspire and inform without exerting undue influence, or for where being passionate about an issue undermines reason and constructive debate. Measures intended to ensure political neutrality may lead to schools being less stimulating. An important lesson for young people is to be tolerant and understanding of the views of others. It is also the case that some of our educational institutions, particularly universities, have a reputation for a particular political slant. I am not necessarily against that, but we must look at the age of the pupils and the extent to which they are able to critically assess the information put in front of them.

I do not wish to stray too far beyond the topic of the debate, but I am also concerned that some young people are encouraged into activism on environmental issues in

a way that may not be entirely healthy. They may be better served by learning to assess rigorously how they know what they know, to delve deeply into the factual and statistical bases for various claims and to judge between them.

Ruth Cadbury: The hon. Gentleman, whom I thank for bringing forward the debate, may be interested to know that research among young people involved in climate activism has shown that their mental health improved as a result of their undertaking appropriate but self-generated activity to support a cause they believe in. I thought that was very interesting.

Mr Fysh: The hon. Lady makes a good point. I do not argue that activism should not be allowed; I just want people to be able to understand, on the basis of facts and statistics, why they might want to be activists.

It is hard to gauge the size of this problem and to compare it with previous times. The evidence tends to be anecdotal. I suspect there have always been teachers with strong views who have not held back in sharing them, although perhaps in the past those views were sublimated in interests in particular texts or topics. However, I can say that I have received complaints from constituents, and I doubt I am alone. I also know that those cases were less about the examination of political ideologies and focused more on personalities—an approach sadly reminiscent of Stormzy's.

I sought the debate because I wanted to reflect the concerns of my constituents and to express my own views about the importance of our children's mental health. Surely, learning that we can disagree with one other without using the language of hatred is one of the most important lessons there is. I accept that there is fault across the political spectrum, but we have only to look at Momentum's contribution to Twitter to see how corrosive it can be when abuse becomes a normalised part of political discourse.

I hope my right hon. Friend the Minister is able to offer some reassurance that the Department is active on this issue. Parents should have a route to voice concerns in a way that does not affect their children, and teachers should have guidance that helps them to be confident in judging where the line is between passionate and coercive.

I have seen rather colourful comments on social media by teachers, who should be mindful that their pupils may be on the same platforms. Whether online or at school, teachers must inspire and equip our children to make up their own minds not just on politics but across a whole range of issues. I end by paying tribute to the overwhelming majority, who do just that.

11.10 am

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to debate yet again under your careful and, if I may say so, unbiased stewardship, Mr Gray. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) for raising this important issue and the excellent way in which he opened the debate. He is right to warn about the coarsening of political debate in the country, which concerns many of us in this House. He is also right that young people should be encouraged to be passionate but not coercive in political debate and how they engage in it.

[Nick Gibb]

One of the most important principles that we want to uphold in education is political neutrality, in relation to both the knowledge taught through the school curriculum and the professional conduct of teachers in how they support pupils in and out of the classroom. Political education is an important part of a broad and balanced education that prepares young people for adult life, and we want young people to be informed and engaged citizens. To ensure that they receive such an education in an unbiased way, all state-funded schools must meet duties regarding impartiality and balanced treatment of political issues in the classroom.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) correctly said, that is provided for in legislation. Section 406 of the Education Act 1996 requires teachers to provide a balanced political view in relation to the direct teaching of pupils by forbidding

“the promotion of partisan political views in the teaching of any subject”.

Teachers may express their personal views, which can sometimes be useful in prompting debate and discussion within the classroom, but in doing so they must have regard to the teacher standards governing professional competence and conduct to ensure that they show tolerance of and respect for the rights and views of others.

Dr Julian Lewis: I am grateful to the Minister for confirming that the 1986 amendment was carried forward in subsequent legislation. Does he agree that, as the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) said, it is perfectly normal for politicians to go and talk about politics in their local schools? However, when I put forward a view—I speak for myself and I hope for her and most other hon. Members—I always emphasise that there are other politicians who would put forward a contrary view. That is perfectly allowed, is it not, by the legislation?

Nick Gibb: My right hon. Friend is right, and I try to do the same thing. One piece of advice in the legislation is that, when teachers teach about political issues, they do not express their views in a way that would exploit pupils’ vulnerability or undermine fundamental British values. When I speak to young people, I always bear that in mind and point out that although I am a passionate supporter of the free market, which I think creates and helps spread wealth in the most effective way across society, there are others who believe that a planned economy and more regulation is a fairer and better way of running an economy. I try to make those points before saying that my personal view is the former. I am delighted to hear that he takes a similar approach.

Section 407 of the 1996 Act requires that where political issues are brought to the attention of pupils, they are offered

“a balanced presentation of opposing views.”

Balanced in that context means fair and dispassionate. The law does not require teaching staff to adopt a position of neutrality between views that accord with the great majority of scientific opinion and those that do not. Therefore, if a particular theory represents mainstream opinion, there is nothing to prevent a school indicating a strong preference for that theory while making minimal but dispassionate reference to the minority

view. However, many of the issues to which my right hon. Friend and my hon. Friend refer are not in that category but are those where large sections of society take opposing views.

My hon. Friend raised the reporting of Stormzy’s visit to a primary school. Schools remain responsible for what is taught and we expect them to have in place robust safeguarding policies that should set out clear protocols ensuring that visiting speakers are suitably supervised. The school should have a clear understanding of why the speaker was chosen and make guests aware of the school’s expectations, such as abiding by its equality commitments; there must be no statements that might cause offence to others or otherwise undermine tolerance of other faiths or beliefs; and there must be no extremist material.

I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to do more to equip children to question and evaluate the information they are presented with, whether that is in newspapers, on television or online. Apart from how teachers present political or any sensitive or controversial subject, the content of the curriculum they teach is vital. Schools have a role to play in teaching children to be savvy consumers of media and information. The best way to do that is by providing them with the fundamental knowledge they need to be able to make informed decisions and critical judgments. That is why we reformed the curriculum to provide the core knowledge that children need to understand the world.

Daniel Willingham, the American academic, author of “Why Don’t Students Like School?”—I highly recommend that book to anyone interested in the education debate—and proponent of the use of scientific knowledge in the classroom, says that processes of thinking are intertwined with the content of thought—that is, domain or subject knowledge. Therefore, if a student is reminded to look at an issue from multiple perspectives often enough, he or she will learn that they ought to do so, but if they do not know much about an issue, they cannot think about it from multiple perspectives. We can teach students maxims about how they ought to think, but without background knowledge and practice they will probably not be able to implement the advice they have been asked to memorise. Therefore, just as it makes no sense to try to teach students factual content without giving them opportunities to practise using it, it also makes no sense to try to teach critical thinking devoid of factual content.

The national curriculum we inherited in 2010 had been stripped of too much knowledge, with a heavier focus on the skills of learning. The Government therefore embarked on significant reforms to the national curriculum with the aim of restoring the importance of subject knowledge in all its complexity and fascination. In 2014 the new, more ambitious and knowledge-rich national curriculum came into force in England, and from 2015 we introduced more rigorous GCSEs. That is the most efficacious approach to helping young people to be more discerning and challenging of the views expressed online and in wider society.

The reformed national curriculum sets out a core body of knowledge that should form part of a school’s curriculum, giving schools the autonomy to decide how to teach it to maximise pupil understanding and address their misconceptions. The 12 national curriculum programmes of study not only avoid political bias by

focusing on core subject knowledge, but enable teachers to consider how pupils can better evaluate and challenge fake news or misleading information, which can often be presented to them in social media as facts.

My right hon. Friend and my hon. Friend referred to guidance. We issued amended guidance in summer 2018 to remind schools of their responsibilities. The online staffing and employment advice for all schools was updated to say:

“All staff have a responsibility to ensure that they act appropriately in terms of their behaviour, the views they express (in particular political views) and the use of school resources at all times, and should not use school resources for party political purposes.”

I hope that provides my hon. Friend with some reassurance that we take these issues extremely seriously.

Dr Julian Lewis: The circumstances of 1986, which led to the legislation, were that some people were advocating the introduction of anti-imperialist studies in schools, and peace studies—anti-nuclear propaganda—was also being spread. It was those paradigm cases that led Parliament to legislate, and I am grateful to the Minister for his clear utterance that such legislation still holds good today.

Nick Gibb: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. That legislation is still in force. Being from the same era as him, I too recall the debates that took place at that time.

The Government have actively supported teachers in developing their school curriculums beyond the national curriculum. Most relevant to this debate is the Government's educate against hate website, which hosts resources for schools to support the promotion of democracy, including those on media literacy. Between September and November 2019, the website was visited over 80,000 times.

Schools do many other things across the curriculum to ensure that pupils are equipped to question and challenge what they read, watch and listen to. An online piece written by the headteacher of Passmores Academy in Harlow on the topic of fake news comments on how vital it is to teach young people to check their own facts. The head of English at that school organised activities including students learning the truth behind the scaling

of maps in geography, how propaganda has been used throughout history, diet myths, the manipulation of statistics, and the role of computer-generated imagery in the creation of fake news. Additionally, media bias was debated, leading to extended pieces of writing being produced on the subject.

Online safety is an important component of the new relationships, sex and health education. From September 2020 it will be mandatory for schools to teach those subjects. They are about empowering pupils with the knowledge that will support their current and future relationships and health, enabling them to become active and positive members of society. Pupils will be taught about online relationships, the implications of sharing private or personal data online, harmful content and contact, cyber-bullying and where to get help and support.

In Ofsted's new inspection framework, the personal development judgment focuses on the development of pupils' character, their confidence, resilience, independence and knowledge. It includes matters such as pupils' ability to recognise and respond to online and offline risks to their wellbeing.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil for securing this debate. He has raised important concerns, shared by other hon. Members, as we have heard. I hope that he is reassured that there is legislation and support for schools in place, to mitigate the threat of political bias in our school system and to help young people be resilient to the concept of fake news.

James Gray (in the Chair): Would Mr Fysh like to reply?

11.21 am

Mr Fysh: I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for his response, and I thank everybody who has taken part in the debate. It is critically important that our young people are resilient to the impact of fake news and different types of propaganda, as he has set out. I thank him very much.

Question put and agreed to.

11.22 am

Sitting suspended.

Palestinian School Curriculum: Radicalisation

[MARK PRITCHARD *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered radicalisation in the Palestinian school curriculum.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard.

I am grateful to be leading my first Westminster Hall debate on such an important and timely subject. I am delighted to see so many Members present, and I am mindful of ensuring everyone has time to speak, so I will limit the interventions I take. I refer hon. Members to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests of a fact-finding visit I made to Israel and the Palestinian Authority last year.

During my trip, I was struck by the national pride that both the Israelis and Palestinians hold so dear, and faced the difficult reality that peace remains a distant dream. Zionist pioneers made the desert bloom, and Palestinian olive groves are world renowned. The potential for the land and the people is immense, yet no matter what land borders have been proposed in peace negotiations in the 73 years since the UN partition plan of 1947, the Palestinian leadership has rejected every option. I found myself wondering how that could be the case, when a two-state solution is clearly the only way to reconcile Jewish and Arab aspirations of self-determination in the land. It became apparent that the answer is not especially palatable: over many decades, Palestinian children have grown up in an environment of institutionalised radicalisation.

In schools named after suicide bombers, schoolchildren are taught from the age of six that Israel is a temporary construct that will,

"disappear as the fog over the sea".

Palestinians are rightly proud of their youth literacy rate, which is among the highest in the world, but it is undermined by the more harmful material within the curriculum, which plays a significant part in indoctrinating the population. Eight-year-olds learn poetry from the following verse:

"I vow I shall sacrifice my blood, to saturate the land of the generous and will eliminate the usurper from my country, and will annihilate the remnants of the foreigners."

As a former secondary school teacher myself, I know just how impressionable young minds are and the impact that such messaging can have on pupils' development, values and world view.

A report published by the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education in September 2019 found that the most recent Palestinian Authority school textbooks are even more extreme than previous editions. Despite promises from the PA to review and remove unacceptable content, the report concludes that there is a "clear deterioration" in terms of content meeting UNESCO-derived standards for peace and tolerance in school education. After examining 202 textbooks from the current curriculum, IMPACT-se found,

"a systematic insertion of violence, martyrdom and jihad across all grades and subjects",

where,

"the possibility of peace with Israel is rejected".

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Like him, I took advantage of one of the fact-finding trips organised by Conservative Friends of Israel in 2015, when I was first elected. The trip took in both Palestine and Israel, and while I was there we heard about a youth football tournament that had been hugely successful in uniting both regions. Does he agree that that demonstrates that there is an appetite for peace among young people, but that examples such as the ones he is giving seriously undermine the opportunities for it to happen?

Jonathan Gullis: I could not agree more. When I walked around the streets of Jerusalem, I saw Jew and Arab side by side, living peacefully together with the Christian community. There is indeed an appetite among the people of Palestine and the people of Israel to live side by side in peace. Sadly, it is the Palestinian Authority who keep dodging the answers to these very important questions.

Peace is not presented as preferred or even possible. Palestinian children are not taught what peace will even look like. Peace agreements and proposals with Israel that previously appeared in Palestinian Authority schoolbooks have been removed. Nine-year-olds are asked to count the number of martyrs in Palestinian uprisings—"If the number of martyrs of the first intifada is 2,026 martyrs, and the number of martyrs of the Al-Aqsa martyrs intifada is 5,050" and so on. Imagery in a textbook for 16-year-olds implies that Jews control the world. Ten-year-olds are taught that Jews are enemies of Islam and eight-year-olds learn in their textbooks that Jerusalem is a holy city only for Muslims and Christians. Right hon. and hon. Members will no doubt be aware that Jerusalem has been at the core of the Jewish faith and world for more than 3,000 years. Make no mistake: this is antisemitism, and we must condemn it as strongly as we fight antisemitism at home.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): Mr George Bradford, a constituent of mine, works hard to raise awareness about extremist teaching in Palestinian schools. I met him here in Parliament last week. Does my hon. Friend agree that such awareness-raising has a valuable role as part of wider debates such as this one?

Jonathan Gullis: I agree absolutely. We must ensure that we raise awareness of this issue. It is sad that it has taken a *Daily Mail* report to bring this matter to the public eye on a wider scale in the United Kingdom. We must do more to bring it to the world's attention. We have seen other countries taking such a strong stance.

I mentioned that Palestinian schools are named after terrorists—at least 31 at the last count. Five of those schools are named after Dalal Mughrabi, the perpetrator of one of the worst terror attacks in Israel's history, the 1978 coastal road massacre. Mughrabi led the hijacking of a bus and the murder of 38 civilians, including 13 children. She is portrayed as a central female role model for Palestinian girls. In the Arabic language textbook for 10-year-olds, of which I have a copy here, there is a large image of Mughrabi with the accompanying text:

"Dalal Mughrabi: Our Palestinian history is brimming with names of martyrs who have given their lives to the homeland, including the martyr Dalal Mughrabi. Her struggle portrays challenge and heroism, making her memory immortal in our hearts and minds".

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. May I just say to the hon. Gentleman that for his first speech he is doing very well, but under Standing Orders I am afraid that Members are not allowed to use photographs or props, or make reference to them. That is the first thing. Secondly, it makes it very difficult for *Hansard* to record something that is an object rather than text. I am sure he will note that, and I ask forgiveness for interrupting his flow.

Jonathan Gullis: Thank you, Mr Pritchard. I apologise, but you can understand the importance of the material that was on display.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the great speech that he is making. Is he aware that in addition to the 31 schools named after terrorists from the Palestinian Authority, three are named after Nazi collaborators? That sends a clear message, not only that killing Israelis is something that children should be encouraged to do, but that they will be honoured for undertaking such a heinous crime.

Jonathan Gullis: I am aware of that. Such a blatant attempt to stir up racial hatred and bring up what is a very dark history is despicable and disgusting. As one whose step-grandmother was born in Germany in the 1920s, went through an education system under Nazi rule and has lived with the shame of a nation—as many Germans do, even though they played no part in the atrocities that took place—I absolutely agree that reliving, remembering and reminding the Israeli people of such horrors should never ever be allowed, and that it should be called out for what is.

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): The fact that holocaust denial is most prevalent in Gaza and the west bank compared with elsewhere in the world—standing at around 82% of the population—proves that something is going seriously wrong. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Palestinian education system should seek to promote peace and unity, with a curriculum driven by facts and history, rather than continuing to push prejudice and division?

Jonathan Gullis: I am sure my hon. Friend's knowledge of that issue is far greater than mine. She has been leading the charge among the new intake of Members of Parliament to ensure that we tackle the scourge of antisemitism, not just in UK society but in the wider world. I could not agree more that we must promote peace and we must expect the Palestinian Authority to promote peace, because a two-state solution will never be achievable unless both sides share the common goal of finding a peaceful solution. The two-state solution is one that I passionately believe in.

The majority of Palestinians are under the age of 25, and recent polling has shown that they are increasingly moving towards more extreme ideology. It is with sad inevitability that the radical incitement I highlight will be a central contributing factor. The Palestinian leadership have failed to provide a positive vision for the future of their people. Until they ensure that their curriculum promotes peace, the prospects for an agreement with Israel will remain bleak.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): My hon. Friend and I were together on that last trip to Jerusalem. He knows that I try to take a balanced view of the middle east and previously visited the area with a Palestinian charity. Most alarming is that these propaganda books are available to children as young as six, and that those on the Palestinian side found guilty of terrorism offences against Israelis—not throwing stones at buses; I have been critical about the way such people have been treated by the courts—are as young as 11. These deeply impressionable young people are being indoctrinated by the failed Palestinian Authority, which relies on fear and the poverty of the Palestinians to foment hatred against Israelis and the wider world. That is what this amounts to. It is in nobody's interests for these textbooks be allowed, and certainly not at our taxpayers' expense.

Jonathan Gullis: I remember that trip. When we met members of the Palestinian Authority, including one of the chief negotiators back in the early 1990s, we saw the lack of drive and vision for how to reach a two-state solution. I could not agree more with my hon. Friend and will not try to better his comments, because he perfectly summed up the situation. The self-interest of these leaders in prolonging the conflict causes immeasurable long-term harm to the Palestinian and Israeli people.

I welcome to the Minister to his place, and I understand that he may not yet have had the chance to raise these issues with his Palestinian counterparts, but does he agree that we have a duty of care to children worldwide who receive UK aid to ensure that their educational experience is positive? Will he confirm that £20 million of annual UK support the Palestinian Authority contributes to the salaries of teachers and health workers through a vetted EU list? Does the UK monitor the training programme for the teachers whose salaries we pay? Who oversees that programme?

While it is not necessarily the UK's place to determine the narrative and content of another territory's curriculum, we are duty-bound to intervene immediately should unacceptable materials be used in education systems supported financially by British taxpayers.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The House of Commons Library briefing shows that, on 1 April 2018, in response to reports about this sort of material, the Department for International Development's media team stated:

“DFID is planning to conduct a thorough assessment of the Palestinian curriculum and evidence and if we find evidence of material which incites violence, we will take action.”

That is coming up to two years ago, so I think we ought to have heard something from the Government about this by now.

Jonathan Gullis: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend. One reason why I wanted to secure the debate is that two years is absolutely too long. We need to ensure that UK aid money—UK taxpayers' hard-earned money—is used appropriately, for aid and support and not to promote violence and extremism.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Debate and concerns raised in this place about this issue go back more than two years—check the parliamentary record. For five years-plus, concerns have been consistently

[Stephen Crabb]

raised by Members from various parties about the use of discriminatory and inciteful language in textbooks that, directly or indirectly, UK aid is helping to finance. We have heard repeated assurances from various Ministers over the years. One question we need an answer to is why there has been so little progress in clamping down on this destructive activity.

Jonathan Gullis: I agree completely that this has been going on for far too long. Warwick University's vice-chancellor has failed to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism. That is an absolute abomination. UK textbooks, including those produced by Pearson, contained material that had to be removed. It is bad enough when that happens in our own country; we should be even stricter and harsher in ensuring that UK taxpayers' money spent overseas is used appropriately.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The hon. Gentleman brings a lot of legitimate concerns to the House. On the timing and the immediacy of this debate, he will be aware that the Georg Eckert Institute is investigating this issue for the European Union, and the report is due in a couple of weeks' time. I suggest that there would be merit in waiting for the report from the institute, because it has the advantage of being independent; it has no axe to grind. In what is always a highly charged debate, honest brokers can play a valuable role.

Jonathan Gullis: I agree that the report will be extremely important, and along with many other Members I look forward to reading its lessons and how we can make progress. While I and my colleagues may display a lot of passion, I totally take on board those facts and hope that that report will be made available for public consumption and not kept behind closed doors. The EU is duty-bound to ensure that everyone has a right to see what the institute manages to find.

Does the Minister share my grave concern that, even if we are not directly funding the publication of these textbooks, we are paying for teachers and public servants in the education sector to draft, implement and teach this material, potentially in schools named after terrorists? I was encouraged by the UK's call for international action on the content of these textbooks. The ongoing EU review of Palestinian textbooks is under way after months of delays, and the Minister for the middle east, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), confirmed in a written answer last week that the interim report will be completed in spring, with the full report due later this year. Will the Minister confirm that the interim report and subsequent full report will be made publicly available, to ensure transparency and openness at every level?

The Minister no doubt shares my view that we have a responsibility to protect children who are supported by the UK, and that the continued use of the textbooks amounts to nothing short of child abuse.

Robert Lorgan (High Peak) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Like him, I have been to Ramallah in the west bank, and met members of the Palestinian Authority. It worries me that they not only glorify terrorism but financially reward it, paying monthly salaries to terrorists and their families to the

tune of £260 million in 2018, or 7% of their entire budget. Like him, I desperately want to see peace, but while those payments continue, the prospect is bleak.

Jonathan Gullis: My hon. Friend speaks with absolute authority on this subject. It is utterly shameful that money is paid to terrorists who have committed heinous crimes against the people of Israel and foreign nationals in Israel. This problem affects us globally. We absolutely need to ensure that the funding stops, because it does not show any sign of facilitating peace in the future.

This issue is taken extremely seriously by our colleagues in Europe. In 2018, the European Parliament's budgetary committee voted to freeze more than €15 million of Palestinian Authority funding if they do not remove incitement from their textbooks. Last year, the ruling coalition in the Norwegian Parliament voted to withhold funding to the Palestinian Authority if this content is not removed. Our ambitions for a global Britain must include safeguarding for all recipients of UK aid, particularly in areas of conflict.

The UK Government provide £65.5 million annually to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which delivers vital humanitarian aid to Palestinian refugees, including education and healthcare. However, UNRWA schools in the west bank and Gaza use the official Palestinian Authority curriculum, so the textbooks I have quoted from are being used in UN schools that the UK and international partners support. In August 2019, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination criticised the content of these textbooks for perpetuating prejudices and hatred. While one UN agency condemns the textbooks, another promotes them.

Uniquely, UNRWA extends refugee status beyond the UN's 1951 refugee convention, to the descendants of all Palestinian refugee males, meaning that the UN recognises 5 million registered Palestinian refugees, rather than the estimated 30,000 refugees alive today. There are now more than 320,000 Palestinian refugee children in UNRWA schools in the west bank and Gaza—internationally designated Palestinian territories. Children in those schools are taught that they are refugees from what is now Israel, and that they will one day return, in line with the teachings in their textbook. Does the Minister believe that that is compatible with our stated aim to protect the political and physical viability of a two-state solution? A right of return for 5 million Palestinian refugees will demographically end Israel's existence as a Jewish state. I do not suggest withdrawing UK aid contributions to Palestinians in need, but this Government—the people's Government—must demand value for money and, with international partners, place pressure on the UN agency to ensure that its work lays the groundwork for a two-state solution, rather than prolonging the conflict.

I shall finish by reflecting on the impact that the Palestinian Authority curriculum has had in recent years on the children whom they are duty-bound to protect. Since September 2015, 87 Israelis and foreign nationals have been killed and more than 1,520 wounded in 210 stabbings, 239 shootings, 77 car ramblings and one bus bombing. Palestinian youths under the age of 21 have carried out many of those acts of terrorism. Even screwdrivers have been used as weapons, and perpetrators have included children as young as 11 years old.

It is well known that Palestinian terrorists who kill Israelis receive monthly payments to reward their acts of terrorism, with higher salaries given to those who have killed more Israelis. It should be a matter of great sadness to us all that these children are raised in an environment infected with radical messages, with no hope for peaceful co-existence with Israel. No curriculum is perfect, as we are very much aware, and it is ultimately for the Palestinian Authority to address these issues, but they are recipients of UK aid so there is an expectation that they will uphold international standards of understanding, peace and tolerance, as set out in article 29 of the convention on the rights of the child.

There is a memorandum of understanding underpinning DFID's support for the Palestinian Authority that requires the PA to commit to the principle of non-violence, and that includes a commitment from the PA to take action against incitement to violence and address allegations of incitement in the education curriculum. Recent UK assessments have concluded that the Palestinian Authority demonstrate a credible commitment to that principle. Does the Minister agree that that simply does not compute with the material that I have highlighted today?

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this important matter to the House today. I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government should be looking very closely at the psychological impact of these materials on children and their upbringing? Should they not ensure that the work done by the Department for International Development, including in my own constituency of East Kilbride, fosters positive mental health and wellbeing throughout the early years, and supports and builds individuals who will be positive contributors to society? Some of the materials that he has described certainly run counter to that aim.

Jonathan Gullis: I could not agree more. Again, we are seeing vulnerable young children growing up in a world of conflict who already have some sort of psychological damage, just because of the situation and circumstances in which they live. To add on top of that the material seen in these textbooks and for that to be taught by their teachers will only create more harm. The money could be much better spent on creating a peaceful, tolerant society, while providing world-class mental health support.

While my constituents in Stoke-on-Trent North endure multiple types of deprivation and rightly call for greater funding for our schools, the UK's commitment to build peaceful and stable societies overseas clearly misses the mark in this case. I struggle to look my constituents in the eye and justify our overseas aid spending when their hard-earned money enables radicalisation and UK-funded teachers use textbooks filled with hate. The two-state solution that we all hope to see remains unachievable so long as another generation of Palestinians are growing up indoctrinated to hate Israel and Jews. It is our responsibility as donors to ensure that the Palestinian Authority sit up and take note.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. Because of the interest in the debate, I shall set a time limit at this point of four and a half minutes.

2.53 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I declare an interest as the new chair of Labour Friends of Israel, and I refer hon. Members to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) on securing the debate and on an excellent speech. I also pay tribute to former Members Joan Ryan and Dame Louise Ellman, who did so much to lead debate on this subject in the previous Parliament. Like the hon. Gentleman, I strongly support a two-state solution. That is precisely why I believe that we must urgently tackle the issue of radicalisation in the Palestinian school curriculum. As we have heard, it seeks to pass on old hatreds and prejudices to a new generation of young people. It is a barrier to reconciliation and co-existence. It is pernicious and simply unacceptable.

However, as we have also heard, this is not an issue just for the Palestinian Authority; our Government share some of the responsibility. UK taxpayers fund the salaries of some 30,000 teachers and officials in the Palestinian education authority. Those are the people involved in the implementation and delivery of this curriculum. Let us be clear: we are paying the salaries of those who designed and administer the curriculum and those who teach it. As we have heard, the memorandum of understanding that governs British aid states clearly that the Palestinian Authority should abide by principles of non-violence. I think that the hon. Gentleman quoted the provision about incitement in the educational curriculum, so I will not repeat that, but we know that it has existed for many years. Every year Ministers claim that DFID's annual reviews—reviews that are not published, incidentally—show that the PA are upholding their commitments. I have to ask: how do they show that?

Last year, former Minister Alistair Burt admitted that the content of textbooks is not covered in the reviews and that DFID plays no role in relation to textbook material. I therefore say to this Minister that, whatever has happened in the past, surely now we have to have some commitment that we will look at that if it is to be possible, in all honesty, to say that the PA are complying with the memorandum of understanding.

Dr Julian Lewis: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is not good enough for a Government to say, "We do not fund this or that directly," because while we are giving funds to the Palestinian Authority for one thing, we are releasing funds for them to use for other things and therefore indirectly we are subsidising these abuses, even if we are not doing so in a more direct fashion?

Steve McCabe: I do agree. I suspect that every one of us here supports the aid programme, but we do not support the misuse of the aid programme. I am certainly not here to attack the Minister, but I am here to say that we have to guard our own best interests in the way the programme is being applied. I think that is the right hon. Gentleman's point.

I hope that the Minister will comment on the independent evaluation that the PA say they have commissioned from the Arab European Foundation. I have not seen the evaluation, and I do not know whether the Minister has. If he has, will he be kind enough to place a copy in the Library, and does he think that there will be any action by the PA as a result of that report?

[Steve McCabe]

I hope that the Minister will accept that many people have raised this matter before. Joan Ryan and Louise Ellman first raised it back in September 2017. Their concerns were initially dismissed. Then they were promised an independent international review. That took about 10 months, to be honest, and it was supposed to report last September. I obviously welcome the review by the Georg Eckert Institute, but I believe that what we are now waiting for is a short interim report. Can the Minister give us any further update on that and whether it will be placed in the Library?

I think the short line here is that there have been many promises but little action. Ministers claimed in 2018 that new textbooks were being piloted. That turned out to be untrue. In 2019 the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education reported that the same curriculum was being taught for the third consecutive year. Mr Saidam, the PA Education Minister, committed to a constructive review but later denounced an attack on the Palestinian curriculum by the Zionist lobby.

The bottom line is that Britain is bankrolling this curriculum. We must take responsibility. I think we are agreed that we need to see some action.

2.59 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), who did a very good job of outlining this concerning and difficult set of issues. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe). I wish him all the best in taking over Labour Friends of Israel. I declare my interest as the House of Commons chairman of Conservative Friends of Israel.

I will be brief. I do not want to repeat anything that my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North spoke about. I strongly support a two-state solution. I am a friend of Israel, but I do not believe that being a friend of Israel prevents one from being a friend of Palestinians, too. I am proud that I was part of the Government that increased their aid spending to reach the 0.7% target. I am a strong believer in the power and effectiveness of UK aid when it is spent well. Being a friend and supporter of UK aid does not prevent me from raising concerns and criticisms, where they are fair.

The concerns and criticisms raised this afternoon are entirely fair. We have previously debated these issues, in this Chamber and during Question Time in the main Chamber. Having participated in this debate for the past five years, I sometimes feel that when we raise issues with the Minister, he wants to say, "Please move along; there is nothing to see here." Actually, there is something really concerning to see here, and more examples have been raised this afternoon.

A number of hon. Members present were also at a meeting with the deputy mayor of Jerusalem, Fleur Hassan-Nahoum, who recently visited the UK Parliament to alert us to some of these fresh issues. I want to put on the record my tribute to Fleur Hassan-Nahoum for her work on this matter and more broadly in that difficult but wonderful city of Jerusalem, across its divisions. A few weeks ago, I was with her, with other members of

my party. As well as talking about this issue, Fleur introduced us to some inspiring Palestinian Arab women in Jerusalem who are setting up their own businesses.

There are reasons to be hopeful when visiting the region. I go there most years wearing my CFI hat. I am always looking for those green shoots of hope. There are reasons to be hopeful, but confronting an issue such as this can make us feel incredibly depressed. Those young minds are being poisoned. When I meet Palestinians in the West Bank, one of the big barriers to any serious talk of a two-state solution and a peace deal that I become conscious of is a pervasive cultural acceptance of and support for violence. That starts at a really young age, with young minds in school.

As a Government that take pride in the aid that we give, it is right that we support humanitarian assistance to Palestinians—I believe in that—but it is also right that we ask difficult questions about how that money is spent. It is not good enough to be told that we are not funding these textbooks directly. The fact is that we are funding education in the Palestinian Territories. That is a good thing, if it is done well. We should own this issue and be more challenging of our friends in the Palestinian Authority, who, for whatever reason, try to make us believe there is not a serious issue here, when there is.

I say to the Minister that this issue goes beyond the Palestinian Territories. Different organisations, including Christian Solidarity Worldwide, recently raised with me examples of extremism and discriminatory language in textbooks used in Pakistani schools. Pakistan is one of the largest recipients of UK aid. There is a broader issue here about how we are spending aid. As a friend and supporter of the UK aid budget, I want to see aid spent well.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North for raising this difficult subject. I look forward to the Minister's response.

3.4 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) on securing the debate. I thank him for the way he set the scene. I am happy to stand with him and other hon. Members on this matter, and to say to the Minister that there must be a change in the way things are done in this Department.

This is not the first time I have spoken on this issue, and I assure hon. Members and the Department that as long as God spares me this will not be the last time, unless aid distributed by DFID is not misused, as currently is the case. I was a member of the DUP Friends of Israel group in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and I am a member here too. I unapologetically stand with Israel and its citizens in this debate.

As the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) said, I want Palestine to have the opportunity to go forward and the two-state solution could well be the way to do that, but for that to happen there must be commitment from the Palestinians. They must stop their attacks upon Israelis, and that must be the basis for any progress.

I ask the Minister to request that his Department reviews the UK funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, where the money goes through to the Palestinian refugees. It seems to me—the information

we received indicates this—that they are deliberately using educational books to focus on Palestinian young people, who are easily influenced. It is important that education is not used for the wrong reasons.

We should remember that the controversy around the use of different funds by the Palestinian Authority is not new; it covers many more issues than Palestinian textbooks. Although that is the starting point, it shows what the end goal is: namely, to perpetuate hatred against Israelis by indoctrinating children with spin and lies, which is more akin to what Goebbels would have done in the second world war. This House must not aid the Palestinian propaganda machine by ignoring the signs.

Ever since I entered the House in 2010, the misuse of funds has been a regular topic. For example, successive DFID Ministers regularly denied that a World Bank trust fund to which the UK made significant contributions enabled money to be sent to terrorists. The evidence said differently. The recipients claimed that the money funded the salaries of 85,000 Palestinian Authority civil servants, but as far back as 2014 a report by the International Development Committee stated:

“We are nevertheless concerned that DFID is not taking adequate measures to prevent its funds from being misused. Given the scale of the operation, with 85,000 civil servants being paid with UK money, there is a serious risk of abuse. We do not regard a six-monthly audit as an adequate protection to secure the integrity of UK aid funds... We recommend that DFID impose more stringent checks to ensure that the money it provides to the PA is not being misused while pursuing a constructive dialogue with the PA on the end-use of funds.”

Jonathan Gullis: Having enjoyed conversations with the hon. Gentleman, I know that he speaks with years of experience. My stepmother was involved in the peace process in Northern Ireland, using music education to bring the different factions together. Does he agree that Northern Ireland is a good example of how, when peace and tolerance are taught in the curriculum, we can unite a country, rather than continue to see division, as we do with the Palestinian Authority, the Israelis and the Arab people of the area?

Jim Shannon: I agree. In my conversations with the hon. Gentleman prior to this debate we discussed those matters and were clear on what we wish to see. Northern Ireland may be an example, and it is one we use many times. We now have a working Assembly again, so there is an indication of a political process that can move forward. That requires tolerance and that both sides of society are prepared to be more respectful of others.

To return to the report of the International Development Committee, it has subsequently been discovered that the list of 85,000 civil servants to which DFID claimed it used to pay out millions of pounds of taxpayers' money did not exist, and DFID swiftly redirected the funds to health projects. If the money is transferred for the purposes of education or health, which the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North referred to, no one would see anything wrong with that, but when it is transferred or used for a different purpose, action must be taken.

I understand that this is a difficult debate for the Minister. Whenever the facts are presented, they cannot be ignored. Christian, Jew, Muslim or atheist, the simple fact is that the misuse of millions of pounds of money cannot be acceptable. One interested party said to me that,

in his opinion, the Minister's job is to protect taxpayer's funds, given that previous Ministers and civil servants have been less than successful when it comes to directing Palestinian aid.

The indoctrination of children cannot be funded out of aid. We cannot advocate for hatred. We send that message today. The Minister is the only one with the power to make a change, which would speak louder than my words ever could. Whatever reassurances the Minister offers today will have to be backed up by hard evidence. We must be convinced that not one penny can be diverted from those sources that we all agree it should go to: food and healthcare for the children caught up in this through no fault of their own. They must not be trapped in such a vicious cycle for the rest of their lives.

I look to the Minister, and I will continue looking to him, not because I like him, although he looks well—*[Laughter.]*—but because he is the Minister who has to answer the questions. It is really important that the Department and the Government find the right approach to aid that will end up only in the classroom, with food in the bellies of innocent children. Let us have an honest answer from DFID of where we are.

3.10 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Pritchard. I draw Members' attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Along with many other Members, I participated in a fact-finding trip to Israel, paid for by Conservative Friends of Israel, only last month. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) on securing this debate and on his exceptionally powerful and moving speech. I will not cover the same ground, but the trip that I have just been on and his speech have made it clear to me that we have an awful lot of work to do in this area.

I was struck deeply by this beautiful, historic, troubled land. The names are familiar to many of us and have been for a long time, often for very unhappy reasons. Like everyone here, I long for nothing more than for peace, and for the Israelis and Palestinians to be able to live together in harmony and make the most of this wonderful land together, but I struggle to see how that will happen when the educational biosphere in which young Palestinians grow up is saturated with antisemitic hatred. My hon. Friend quoted some examples from the IMPACT-se report, which I also have in front of me, and I will quote one or two others. One example that particularly struck me was the teaching in science of Newton's second law:

“During the first Palestinian uprising, Palestinian youths used slingshots to confront the soldiers of the Zionist Occupation and defend themselves from their treacherous bullets. What is the relationship between the elongation of the slingshot's rubber and the tensile strength affecting it? What are the forces that influence the stone after its release from the slingshot?”

I was particularly struck by that because it normalises violence and legitimises hatred. There is no way that children are likely to grow up with a normal, benevolent attitude to their fellow citizens when science is taught in such a way.

A second example that particularly struck me came from “Arabic Language”:

[Robert Courts]

“Students in grade 9 Arabic study a story describing a firebomb attack on Israeli passengers traveling on a bus, reporting the terror incident as a ‘barbecue party’...on one of the buses of the colonial settlement.”

Not only is that unacceptable material; it constitutes antisemitic hatred that will prolong and worsen the terrible troubles in that land.

We have established that the curriculum contains difficult material, on which action must be taken. From the Palestinian Authority, we have white-washing and sanitisation; according to the Library briefing, they have said that the contentious parts of the curriculum are “the ripple effects” of the conflict. UNRWA states that it reviews textbooks rigorously and that its curriculum framework

“aims to ensure that our curriculum is in line with UN values.”

To say that it “aims” to do so is surely not good enough.

Then we come to the UK Government’s position. I understand DFID’s perspective that it does not fund the making of the textbooks, but that is a little bit lawyerly, given that it funds the teachers who teach the material in the textbooks. Whichever way we look at it, the UK taxpayer is funding the teaching of this material, even if we do not actually fund the production of the textbooks. We surely have to do something about that.

I know that the Government have an independent report, and I am sure the Minister will refer to it in due course, but will he be kind enough to answer three questions from me? First, why has there been a delay? In December 2018, the review was meant to be completed by September 2019. Secondly, DFID has stated that it “will take action”, but what will that action be? Given that the UK does not fund the textbooks, what action will the Minister be able to take? Thirdly, what comment does he have on the IMPACT-se report, which shows that, despite the objections of European politicians for the third year in a row, the teaching material still exists? That must be changed. Will the Minister comment on those points?

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): I am afraid we will to have to set a time limit of three minutes, and then it will be 10 minutes for the respective Front-Bench speakers.

3.14 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) on securing this debate, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) on his new role. I, too, refer hon. Members to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, because I also went to Israel and the west bank on a fact-finding mission last month.

Hon. Members have highlighted the truly appalling content of Palestinian textbooks in Gaza and the west bank, where textbooks on radical Islamism are being used that are more extreme than previous versions. My hon. Friends have cited extracts that are certainly damning in their divisive nature. However, reform is possible. For instance, Jordan comprehensively reviewed its curriculum in 2015 in response to concerns about radicalisation in the country, and terrorism is now depicted as killing innocent people and having devastating consequences. That is not the case in the textbooks that we are discussing, however. Although it is not perfect, Jordan’s

curriculum can generally be seen as an indication that reform is possible. I wholeheartedly hope that the Palestinian Authority review the textbooks and reflect on their own curriculum to try to encourage future peace with the state of Israel.

Does my right hon. Friend the Minister agree that Jordan’s education reforms show that an alternative approach is achievable and desirable? Is the Minister aware of any ongoing discussions between Jordan and the Palestinian Authority about the content of their respective curriculums? We should not lose hope for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. There is already extensive security co-operation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and there are some fantastic NGOs on the ground in Israel and the west bank laying the groundwork for peace. My right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) has already referred to the fantastic work that Fleur Hassan, the deputy mayor of Jerusalem, is undertaking on the ground in the east of the city.

I will skip forward in the speech that I prepared and ask the Minister a few questions. I hope he will agree that a new approach will empower those who support peace and the two-state solution, rather than the radical voices that benefit from the status quo and continued resentment. That will allow us to support the moving forward of the peace deal. Ultimately, we are not, and nor should we be, in a position to dictate how the Palestinians can and cannot educate their children. Can the Government truly be committed to stamping out antisemitism in our own country when they fund it in a foreign nation? Is it right that we fund divisive, antisemitic, anti-Israeli propaganda?

3.17 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I declare an interest as a parliamentary officer of the Conservative Friends of Israel, and I have visited Israel with them. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) on securing this debate.

Education is a social and cultural right for any child. It plays an important role in reducing poverty and promoting peace and tolerance, regardless of race, religion or gender. School education is one of the most powerful tools available for countering extremist influences. Parents and teachers know and appreciate that young children are extremely impressionable and easily influenced by people in positions of authority, and by the teaching and the books given to them. That underlines the importance of the quality and accuracy of what is taught to children, not only here at home but abroad.

The UK plays an important role in providing financial support to people in need in all corners of the world, and we should be proud of our nation’s contribution to the Palestinian people through UNRWA. UK financial assistance to the Palestinian Authority this year has paid the salaries of 39,000 teachers, doctors, nurses and midwives in the west bank, who have helped to immunise up to 3,700 children against prevalent diseases. The Palestinian Authority have overseen education provision since 1994, following the Oslo accords. It is unfortunate that since they took it on, they have issued the textbooks—they are used in schools in the west bank, the Gaza strip and most of the schools in East Jerusalem—that are the subject of this debate today.

Over the past five years, the Department for International Development has awarded £330 million to UNWRA. However, the agency insists that the schools must follow the curriculum set by the Palestinian Authority, which, as we have heard, glorifies martyrdom and rejects peaceful coexistence with Israel. Although the agency's work includes healthcare, relief and social services, most of the funding that it receives—58%—goes towards education. It is a matter of concern that the textbooks that are used are educating young minds to accept prejudice and hatred, so that six-year-old Palestinian children are reading poems promoting violence, and science lessons depict a young boy with a slingshot targeting Israeli soldiers.

I know that the EU supported an independent review conducted by the Georg Eckert Institute, which is due to report its findings. Should it be the case that the curriculum and its textbooks are indeed warping young minds, rather than educating them, would the Minister agree that the UK should reconsider its funding and insist on a guarantee that schools funded through DFID will teach a non-discriminatory syllabus?

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. Subject to there being no interventions, I think we will make it with three minutes each for the remaining speakers.

3.21 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I join my hon. Friends in thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) for securing today's debate; it is right for the House to consider this important motion. By considering the worrying levels of radicalisation in Palestinian schools today, we are supporting the peace brokers of tomorrow. I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I have travelled to Israel and Palestine on a fact-finding trip.

One thing that the House can do is to agree to denounce any form of hate speech or radicalisation in any curriculum. We must seek to stop radicalisation in schools to curtail extremism where we can. We must recognise that there is a dangerous level of problematic content in the Palestinian curriculum, and that only through diplomatic pressure can we prevent long-term escalation and conflict.

The radicalisation of the Palestinian curriculum is shocking, and I am appalled by the content that is being taught to children from a young age. At its heart, the curriculum repeats a call to arms and a stark antisemitism that risks stability in the region. Calling for teenagers to give their lives for jihad falls far short of UN standards, or indeed any acceptable standards. We have heard the horrific details of how violence is perpetuated through the curriculum.

The radicalisation of the curriculum is, perhaps, most worrying when it rejects the viability of peace in the region. The new curriculum systematically alters history to remove the validity of lasting peace. It no longer mentions previous treaties from the 20th century. The curriculum must acknowledge those treaties to encourage a viable two-state solution in the future. Further important international agreements on the creation of the state of Israel, and Jewish cultural and historical roots in the region, have been omitted.

It is vital for the long-term stability of the region that the school curriculum should teach that peace is a real possibility. That can be achieved only through the recognition of multiple cultural and religious connections to the land. By removing the validity of a two-state system, the Palestinian Authority seek to create a generation of nationalists. Rather than promoting peace and prosperity, the curriculum pushes for martyrdom and jihad. The omission of historical accords does nothing to help to promote lasting peace.

It is not right that British international aid—British taxpayers' money—is going towards supporting a curriculum that actively perpetuates hate. Britain has always supported developing countries through education, and I want that to continue long into the future. It is, however, vital that the Government should limit spending where there is clear evidence—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. Forgive me; I call John Howell.

3.24 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) on securing the debate and allowing us the opportunity to highlight this important issue. I, too, want to refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, with reference to trips to Israel.

My hon. Friend mentioned the recent wave of violence against Israelis: 87 Israelis and foreign nationals have been killed in stabbings, shootings and car-ramming terror attacks in the past five years and more than 1,500 people have been wounded, many of whom face life-changing injuries. Since the Oslo accords of 1993, instead of educating its people towards peaceful coexistence with Israel, the Palestinian leadership has radicalised a new generation of Palestinians, and many are intent on harming Israelis and Jews.

Hon. Members will now be aware of the background of continuous incitement in Palestinian society—from an educational system that denies Israel's right to exist, to the provision of financial incentives to terrorists and their families. Is the Minister aware, and does he share my concerns, that despite assurances from the current and previous Palestinian Education Ministers that incitement will be removed from textbooks, no change has taken place since October 2017? Since there has been no change in three years, how does the Minister intend to ensure that the Palestinian Authority implements the recommendations of the long-awaited EU review? I echo colleagues' calls for the EU report to be made publicly available. Does the Minister agree that that is crucial for transparency?

The Palestinian leadership delivers messages in Arabic to the Palestinian people entirely contradicting the promises they make in English to UK and foreign officials. Is the Minister concerned that the Palestinian leadership says one thing to UK officials and another to the Palestinian people? Does he agree that UK taxpayers' hard-earned money should not be enabling support to be given to terrorism, however indirectly?

Incitement to violence of such a magnitude is simply difficult to accept. We have a duty not only to UK taxpayers, to spend their money wisely, but also to future generations of Palestinians, who deserve a future filled with opportunities, not hate. I, too, started out as an optimist

[John Howell]

on this journey, and I am trying hard to put together at the Council of Europe an exhibition of projects that Israelis and Palestinians have worked on together, including Save a Child's Heart and the work in East Jerusalem that others have referred to. I hope that it comes about, to show that those Palestinians who are derided for—

3.27 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

3.57 pm

On resuming—

[SIR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

John Howell: Shalom.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): We did have one more speaker, but he is obviously detained in his office or somewhere else, so I will go straight to the Front Bencher from the Scottish National party, who has 10 minutes.

3.57 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): Thank you, Sir Charles; colleagues will be glad to know that I will come nowhere near 10 minutes. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in my first Westminster Hall debate.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) on having brought this important subject before the House. As Members may be aware, before my election to this place I was for 15 years a Member of the European Parliament, where I served on the Committee on Foreign Affairs and took a particular interest in the middle east, which is where I grew up. I have a personal connection to the region, and in the middle east, everything is connected to everything else. If anybody who is engaging with the middle east thinks that there are simple answers to black-and-white problems, they really need to pay attention to the wider context.

It goes without saying, but is worth saying none the less, that my party deplores antisemitism in the same way as we deplore Islamophobia and any bigotry, however it is directed. We take a position of principled neutrality on the middle east conflict, but we are in favour of a two-state solution. It is important to have a balanced debate and discussion on these matters. If Members will forgive me, I am not sure that we have entirely achieved balance in our discussion thus far.

There is a problem with Palestinian textbooks. This is a well trodden path that the European Parliament has examined a number of times, and as we have already heard, the European Parliament's Committee on Budgets has called for the suspension of funding to the Palestinian Authority pending resolution of these problems. A live investigation of these matters is under way, and the Georg Eckert Institute is conducting an impartial assessment for the European Union. It is my understanding that that report will be made public, as such reports tend to be, but I join colleagues in calling for it to be made public, because I think the best solution to this issue is ventilation and transparency about what the issues are.

None the less, we should be proud of the fact that we fund teachers, fund UNRWA, and fund the education of some of the most desperate youth in the world. The radicalisation of Palestinian children is of course a problem and something we should be concerned about, but if anybody thinks textbooks are the primary reason why Palestinian children are being radicalised, they are not paying attention to the wider context. We can agree, however, that there is an issue that needs to be looked at and ventilated, as the European Union is doing. I am proud that the United Kingdom Government are funding UNRWA's humanitarian and educational efforts, which are important in a pretty hopeless part of the world. If we want to see where radicalisation is coming from, it is to be found in the hopeless situation that Palestinian youth and the Palestinian people find themselves in.

The Balfour declaration has long roots; we in this House and in these islands are bound to the people of the region. Whatever the constitutional future of the region, we want to see an educated populace, we want to see peace, and we want to see an end to that radicalisation. I agree that textbook content needs to be addressed, and it is being addressed by the European Union in an impartial report. I suggest that we pay close attention to that and reconvene when we have its findings. That will be a better discussion than the ideological discussion that we have heard today.

4 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Charles. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) on securing his first debate. He started with a tough subject, for which I admire him. Like other right hon. and hon. Members, I declare an interest as I visited the region with the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding and Medical Aid for Palestinians.

We all care deeply about the education of children across the world. Nobody comes to this place thinking that that is not exceptionally important. It is even more important in the vulnerable refugee communities that are rightly at the forefront of the Department for International Development's work. I want to be clear that there is no place for promoting hate or intolerance in school curricula or textbooks anywhere in the world. We have a double responsibility where UK aid may be present, either tangentially or in another form.

Last month, I visited the consul general. Hanging outside his residence is a sign that reads:

"Our mission in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. To advance the United Kingdom's security and prosperity through a just peace between a stable, democratic Palestinian State and Israel, based on 1967 borders, ending the Occupation by agreement. To strengthen the ties of friendship between the Palestinian and British peoples."

That is a worthy goal and a worthy ideal that I suspect all 650 MPs would just about agree with. That is the context for the debate. With a sense of sadness, I echo the point made by the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) that perhaps we are having this debate a few months too early. The exceptionally important review of the Georg Eckert Institute will set a context beyond the anger that has properly flown around, and settle things in independent facts. As a result, we will have a better discussion.

I do not mean to be critical, but I was concerned by references to the IMPACT-se report. When Alistair Burt, who is no longer of this parish but who was admired on both sides of the House, was the responsible Minister, he said in a written answer that he was “concerned at...the allegations” in the report and was

“working to commission a robust study”

of it, but that his assessment was that it was

“not objective in its findings and lacked methodological rigour”.

As long as our debates are based on such facts, we will struggle to move forwards. We have a responsibility to try to assemble the best facts.

The Department was right, therefore, when it said last March that it wanted to take an active interest in the issue in conjunction with international partners. If we are to have something that everybody has confidence in, it is best to act collectively, and the EU is an obvious actor in that place. The Opposition have supported the review throughout, and we will to continue to support it, because it has significant implications. What stems from the review will have an impact on the lives of refugee children—what they learn, where they learn and whether they receive an education at all. Those are exceptionally important matters that make a significant difference to people’s lives. We need to work collectively. It was bad when the United States unilaterally pulled out of UNRWA, because that does not promote anything. Even if a country has problems with institutions, to act in that way does not promote peaceful goals and certainly not a two-state solution.

We were expecting the review to be completed in September, so we are six months on. Since it was launched, there has been a lot of change in the Department’s leadership. There have been four Secretaries of State in that time; the Minister is the third Minister who I have shadowed. There is a fear that things will be missed. We hope that there will now be a period of stability and genuine commitment to the Department by the Government.

I know and respect the Minister. He is a good Minister who will do a good job. Like me, he is a plain speaker, so I have some plain questions that I hope will some get plain answers. When will the report be published? What are the Government doing to roll the pitch so that we are ready to act on those recommendations? What conversations are taking place with the Palestinian Authority and what is the nature of those conversations? The hon. Members for Henley (John Howell) and for Darlington (Peter Gibson) mentioned the importance of the Palestinian Authority, and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) asked the Minister what the Palestinian Authority are willing to do. From talking to colleagues in the sector, my understanding is that the PA have said that they are willing to accept criticism and to engage. That has to be the right thing to do.

I do not know the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) well, but he made the outstanding contribution of the debate and spoke brilliantly when he said that we have to see the issue through a lens of reform being possible. That was not the tone of the whole debate. We need to work on it as a moving thing and a live thing. To do that, we need the debate.

UNRWA is another live matter. We were flyered outside the Chamber by someone wanting to put a report about UNRWA into our hands. Many people use

this subject—I am not referring to hon. Members who have engaged with it seriously and soberly—as a proxy measure to damn UNRWA’s work and undermine it. We do that at our peril. UNRWA supports 5.5 million refugees with a range of vital services including education, healthcare, social services, infrastructure services and microfinance, about which the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) spoke strongly. When we undermine UNRWA, we pick at and risk those things.

When I visited the occupied territories last month and I was at the Aida refugee camp, I met UNRWA staff and my first question was about textbooks. Their analysis was that, in their opinion, less than about 3% contravene UN principles, largely on age appropriateness, gender representation and inclusiveness, rather than on issues with Israel; they said that, in response, they had supplemented the curriculum with human rights content. I am interested to hear the Minister’s reflections on whether that chimes with the best information he has. The hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) suggested that the curriculum was saturated. It is absolutely critical that we know the facts, so we know where to go next.

Jim Shannon: I am always respectful to other hon. Members, but if an evidential base proves that the money has been used for ulterior motives, which is wrong, surely that cannot be ignored.

Alex Norris: No, absolutely. This is a case where 97% or 99% compliance will not give hon. Members or people worldwide much confidence. Of course, 1% is too much, but that is the basis to start from. We need to start from the evidence base, which is why we need the report.

Steve McCabe: I want to be clear that I understand my hon. Friend’s point. Earlier, he criticised the IMPACT-se study and said that he would like a more objective study, which is why we should wait. I am happy with that, but surely the impressionistic view that has been given to him, that 3% is not compliant and that there is some supplementary material, is also a subjective assessment. Should we not be wary of putting too much emphasis on that? Would we not be better to settle for his original proposition that, if there is doubt, let us have the clear unbiased objective report and a guarantee that action will be taken on its findings?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for the intervention. On the IMPACT-se point, those were not my words, but the words of the then Minister. On UNRWA, I take the point that we need to see it in the round, but I do not see UNRWA as a particularly politicised operator, and it was on its numbers that I was relying.

From my time with UNRWA, it was clear that if its support stopped quickly, which it could if other Governments act as the United States did, there would not be significant support for people who desperately need it. The Government ought to be commended on their actions when that happened. I hope we can sustain that.

Dr Cameron: Surely that is exactly the point. UNRWA should act quickly to address all the concerns and issues that have been raised. All hon. Members want aid to reach people who are desperately in need, but at the same time, they do not want aid to be used counterproductively or in a way that promotes terrorist ideologies.

Alex Norris: Absolutely. I am sure the staff of UNRWA do not want to be in classrooms teaching such things either. We have common cause here—we need to look at the evidence, because what we need to do will flow from that.

It is important that we look at the wider context. We are answering a fundamental question: why are young Palestinians being radicalised? We have picked one element of the issue—a very important element of it—but I also saw military courts where children were offered arbitrary sentences that were shorter than the period of time they would have been detained to have a full trial. We heard first-hand stories of inconsistent access to life-saving medical treatments. We visited suburbs that had been developed around and heard from children about their lack of hope for their community. Everyone will have seen the physical checkpoints and walls that those children have no prospect of ever passing through. Their lives are lived under the constant threat of demolition. We heard from Israel defence force soldiers, who said it was a part of their operating procedure to inconvenience and to disturb Palestinians, especially young men.

That is the broader context. We serve nobody if we choose only a little bit of context to try to answer the whole question. I know today we have focused on a very important issue—the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North is right to raise it—and we should find solutions, because it gets to the very core of why we use aid spending in this country. However, we will serve no one in the pursuit of a two-state solution if we look like we are picking sides.

As I stood up to speak, I thought about my friends who often have contrasting views on these issues, and I thought, “I hope that when I sit down, I will at least have disappointed them equally.” That is the territory that we are in here and that is the spirit in which we need to continue these conversations. Hopefully, we can revisit it after we have seen the report.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I would just point out to him that if he stops speaking at 4.25 pm, that will give the mover of the motion two minutes to wind up. I call the Minister.

4.11 pm

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) on securing this debate and speaking so passionately. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. It is quite clear that this issue generates significant interest and passion in all corners of the House.

I wish to make a couple of broad points as a backdrop to my further comments. I will seek to address as many of the questions that have been brought up as possible. The Government are clear that quality education is vital to individuals, their families, their communities and wider society. Education has the power not only to transform lives, but to bring hope and to build the foundations for a sustainable, long-term peace, and that is particularly true in the relationship between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The Government are committed to a sustainable, peaceful two-state solution.

We believe that girls’ education is the key that unlocks so many of the challenges around the world; it can break the cycle of poverty, improve health and bring lifelong opportunities to entire countries. That is why we are prioritising the delivery of 12 years of quality education. It is a global priority, which is vital for all girls around the world, including those in the Occupied Palestinian Territories—in Gaza and the west bank. The education of girls is going to be part of the road to a sustainable two-state solution. It is also worth bearing in mind that UNRWA funding, to which the UK contributes, means that half of the people educated in Gaza and the west bank are girls. Without the support of UNRWA, that might not necessarily be the case.

An enduring principle that I think we can all agree on is that antisemitism is unacceptable in all its forms; it is offensive, hateful and has no place anywhere in society, least of all in classrooms. We are therefore deeply concerned by reports of radicalisation in the Palestinian education system, and specifically concerns about the Palestinian Authority’s textbooks and the incitement of hatred and violence towards Israelis. It is clear from this debate that those concerns are shared by Members from all parties in the House.

I will offer the Government’s perspective on this issue and set out the steps that we are taking to address it, and in doing so I hope to cover the questions asked by right hon. and hon. Members. It is important to remember that the UK does not fund textbooks in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The allegations relating to incitement in the Palestinian education system came to international attention following the publication in 2018 of the report by an Israeli non-governmental organisation, the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education—IMPACT-se. They are serious allegations and we take them seriously but, as has already been discussed, they are contested by the Palestinian Authority.

We need to encourage change and support improvement in the Palestinian Authority, and an independent review will help to underpin that, which is why the UK has repeatedly raised concerns about the textbooks with the Palestinian Authority. Most recently, my right hon. friend the Secretary of State for International Development reiterated our concerns in a call to the Palestinian Authority’s Education Minister just last month—it was one of the first calls she made after being appointed by the Prime Minister.

I am pleased to confirm that the Palestinian Education Minister is leading a review into the content of school textbooks, which will be completed in time for the start of the next academic year in September. He has committed that his team are taking into consideration the feedback from a range of sources, both domestic and international, and we seek to support that work.

In addition to our engagement with the Palestinian Authority, the UK has led international efforts to get to the bottom of the situation with regard to the content in the Palestinian Authority textbooks. We funded the development work for the methodology of an independent review, which is sponsored by the European Union. That review by the specialist and respected Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research is under way. As has been discussed, we expect the interim report in the spring, with the full report later on.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): It is good news that the Palestinian Minister is undertaking a review. Have we also got an assurance that any textbooks that are found to be wrong, in every sense of the word, will be withdrawn and not used in the next academic year? That is the point.

James Cleverly: The short answer is that we do not have an absolute guarantee, but as in so much of the work that we do with Israel and the Palestinian Authority, human interaction, persuasion and good old-fashioned diplomacy can bring about change, and that is what we seek to do in our relationship, hence my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State engaging so quickly with the Palestinian Authority's Education Minister.

As I have said, we expect the interim report in the spring and the full report later this year. It is ultimately for the European Union to decide whether it puts the report in the public domain; it is, after all, its report. However, it has been said on both sides of the House that transparency is our friend in this instance, and we will continue to encourage the EU to put that report in the public domain. I think it is worth waiting for that report to underpin the basis for our response to these concerns and our interaction with the Palestinian Authority. We have regular interaction with our European partners on the review and we encourage transparency.

The Government are firm believers in the positive power of education. We are proud of the support that we are providing for education around the world, including in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. It is a vital part of our wider effort to improve lives. In 2018-19, UK aid enabled 26,000 young Palestinians to be educated, and half of them were girls. We do not want to lose that, which is why I treat with caution calls to withdraw funding from UNRWA, because some young people—particularly girls—might lose the opportunity to have an education at all if that were the case. We are very uncomfortable with that option and that risk.

Our money to support education on the west bank goes into a specially dedicated bank account and is paid only to the individuals who are vetted through the Palestinian-European socio-economic management assistance mechanism. Each payment is individually audited to ensure that the money is received by the intended recipient. It is a rigorous process, which means that the UK can be confident that none of our aid is diverted. No UK aid is used for payments to prisoners or their families. Helping to meet essential education needs does not contradict our clear and long-standing message to the Palestinian Authority about prisoner payments.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I apologise for not being present for the start of the debate; I had a Select Committee meeting that clashed. I first raised this issue with a parliamentary question in the European Parliament 19 years ago. Why has the problem not been fixed?

James Cleverly: I detect in the tone of my right hon. Friend's question her frustration at the delay in resolving some of these problems. She is far from alone in feeling frustration that the peace process in the middle east has not progressed as quickly as we would like, but we are actively engaging on this issue. I reiterate that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has engaged quickly

and directly with the Palestinian Authority, and we genuinely hope that a balanced and independently produced report will be the key that unlocks what has been an intractable problem until this point. We will use that, and our position as a respected, honest broker between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli Government, to try to push for improvement and reform.

Jim Shannon: I think the question that we all have in mind is this: is there not a suitable methodology within the system? It is good to provide money for Palestinian children's education, and I understand the logic behind that. What I do not understand is how we check that. How does the Minister or UNWRA ensure that textbooks do not contain material that could lead to terrorism and change children's opinions? That is the thrust of it.

James Cleverly: I recognise the hon. Member's point. We absolutely recognise that this is an imperfect situation, but we are working with the Palestinian Authority, as we will continue to do, to reinforce and support moves to improve textbooks. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) pointed out that Jordan has significantly improved the content of its textbooks. There is a pattern, and that is something on which we will engage with the Palestinian Authority.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I apologise for not being here at the start of the debate; I too was at a Select Committee hearing. Given that this has been an issue for 19 years, what faith does the Minister genuinely have that the Palestinian Authority will investigate the matter properly?

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Minister, you have a minute and a half left.

James Cleverly: Thank you, Sir Charles.

The simple truth is that we have to work with the Palestinian Authority. We have to encourage and support them to do the right thing, but ultimately a sustainable two-state solution will have to be negotiated between the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority. Although there may be concerns about the ability or willingness of the Palestinian Authority to engage in this, they are the organisation through which we have to work in order to have a credible and sustainable two-state solution, so we will be patient. We will be persistent, we will be principled and we will be balanced, but we will keep pushing this agenda.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Mr Gullis, you have until no later than 4.27 pm to wrap up.

4.24 pm

Jonathan Gullis: I am a committed believer in having a UK aid budget that will make a massive difference. However, I cannot escape the fear that, although we might not be paying for textbooks directly, we are somehow freeing up cash within the Palestinian Authority education system to fund the textbooks being distributed, to fund the teachers' training and to have those teachers use the textbooks as part of their wider teacher training programme.

I applaud the Department for International Development. Back in July 2017 it allocated £3 million towards peaceful co-existence projects, which is exactly how I want to see the budget spent. Let us not forget

[Jonathan Gullis]

that it is not just the United States of America that has pulled out of UNWRA; New Zealand, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Belgium all ceased funding back in 2019, due to serious concerns about ethical misconduct allegations. This issue will not simply go away, and we need to look further into UNWRA and what it is doing in the region.

I first engaged with this issue when I visited the region last summer, and I was pleased that it received the national attention it deserves in a recent *Daily Mail* investigation. A few months ago I was teaching at my local school, where every day I saw at first hand the importance of providing children with an education free from prejudice and bias. This place offers an incredible platform to raise such issues, and I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered radicalisation in the Palestinian school curriculum.

Early Years Education: Equality of Attainment

4.27 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of early years education on equality of attainment.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Charles.

I represent one of the poorest communities and constituencies in the country. I take no pleasure in that fact. Sometimes, and especially on the left, it feels like we play poverty Top Trumps and fetishise life in poorer communities. I do not. I grew up in a low-income, lone-parent family and watched my mum work long hours during the day and study at night so that my sister and I could have a better life. Life in poverty is hard, cold and scary. The people in communities such as mine are brilliant, but the circumstances in which many are compelled to live are not.

The one thing that people know about living in poverty is that they are never going back to it, and that experience brought me to this place. As a young person, I wondered why my family seemed to work so hard but had so little help. As I got older and it became clear that my future would be different, I resolved to use my improved life chances and opportunities to stand up for families who are struggling like mine did.

Education is the great leveller. Available universally, it offers everyone the chance to acquire the skills, knowledge and qualifications to change their lives. When it works well, it is transformational. When it does not, it entrenches the inequalities that we seek to tackle. I still see that too often in my community, and the most patent inequality is between rich and poor—those who have, and those who have not. The gap between people from wealthy families and those from poor families has been too large for too long, with significant implications for the adult lives of those who miss out, because qualifications so often determine income, opportunities and social mobility.

We know that education has the greatest impact and is the greatest leveller when it takes place early in the life course, which is the subject of the debate. In early years education, for children until the age of five, it is about trying to address lifelong inequalities before they arise and breaking the cycle of poverty. After that, we are just firefighting; it is still important, but we are playing catch-up. It is important that we take opportunities such as this to critique the Government's early years policies, because they are supposed to be making a difference right now.

With an ever-changing UK labour market, the consequences for young people not starting on the right path are as dramatic as they have ever been, if not more so. I will borrow slightly from the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) by talking a little about white working-class boys, as we did the week before last, when he and the Minister were both here. That cannot be spoken about too much and is not spoken about enough. In my community, the group that struggles the hardest is white working-class boys.

I have given the figures before in the main Chamber, but they bear repeating. In Nottingham, our primary education has come so far on such a rapid journey, and I am proud that we have broadly reached the national

average for key stage 2 outcomes. That is not the best or only measure, but it is a significant one. But that success masks significant inequalities between boys and girls, because 70% of girls reach that expected standard for reading, writing and maths combined, while the same is true for only 59% of boys. In different primaries in my constituency, 76% of girls meet the expected standard but only 35% of boys, or 79% and 40%, or 92% and 50%. Of the 29 primary schools in my constituency for which I have data, boys have worse outcomes in 26 of them, and in 17 schools the attainment gap is over 10%. The differences are greatest in the poorest and least diverse communities.

That is a significant challenge that is replicated across the country. White British children who are eligible for free school meals are consistently the lowest performing group. In 2015, only 595 white British boys who were eligible for free school meals achieved level 4 or better in reading, writing and maths—21 percentage points behind the national average. Furthermore, only one in four white British boys eligible for free school meals will achieve five GCSEs at A* to C, whereas the national average is almost 60%. This is a story in which groups of children—always the poorest, often the boys and particularly white British boys—start behind, and that gap grows.

There are many factors in creating that gap, including stereotyping and bias at home or even within education, stress at home, and parents' negative views towards education, which can damage young people's potential and aspirations. I have been a chair of school governors in my community for a decade, and I frequently see the parental attitude to education reflected in the child's. The parents did not enjoy their time at school and they pass that on to their children in a sort of self-defeat, not daring to live a full life because of the disappointments of the past.

Our two brilliant universities, the University of Nottingham and Nottingham Trent University, provide great outreach programmes—I suspect they include Mansfield—for which they visit schools. I have observed those lessons, and the kids come out bursting with ideas. Although university is not the be-all and end-all, it is not something that happens to many people in my community. In many cases, kids who go home and say, "I'm going to go to university," will hear the answer, "No, you're not." That is extraordinary and we have to overcome it, because those experiences can lead to poor mental health and emotional wellbeing in children and perpetuate a lack of engagement in education. That is cyclical.

Our schools do what they can to bridge the attainment gap. I chair the school governors at Rosslyn Park Primary School, which is the most challenged school in the city and the region by income deprivation affecting children index score. Before even getting a textbook out or writing on the whiteboard, teachers are learning about the social and emotional aspects of learning and pastoral care—never mind high-level safeguarding work with the local authority—and they do incredible things just to get the children ready to learn. That work has its roots in the ages between nought and five, because we find that when children come to school for the first time, too many are still in nappies or unable to form basic words, with 0% at the combined level of expected development, leaving an awful lot for a school to do. Schools are at the heart of the debate, but they cannot wave a magic wand to overcome those obstacles.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for mentioning our debate in this Chamber a few weeks ago about white working-class boys and attainment. An issue that seems to cut across later attainment and across different measures—the number of young men who end up in prison, for example—is their ability very early on to communicate effectively and understand what is happening around them, particularly in the classroom. Does he agree that early years communication and language support, particularly through provision in nursery and primary schools, is hugely important to helping kids to engage with school in the first instance and reach the right attainment levels later on?

Alex Norris: I absolutely share that view. The hon. Gentleman will know from visiting schools and discussing behaviour with teachers and senior leaders, as all Members do, that they talk about the frustration and anger that build up in children—particularly white British boys—which leads to temporary and permanent exclusions. That all comes from the fundamental starting point of not really being able to engage fully and getting frustrated, as we all would.

I have time enough to explain the context in my community with a little potted history of Nottingham. I am sure that the context applies to Mansfield as it does to my part of the city of Nottingham. Ours is one of the poorest parts of the country, but it was not always that way. Up until four decades ago, we had lots of skilled work, with Boots, Rayleigh, Players, Plessis, the pits and much more, but over the course of a generation, virtually all of that has gone. The massive impact on confidence and aspiration means that cyclical poverty has flowed from that, but, for the first time in a generation, we have a chance to change it. In my community, we have three exciting opportunities: High Speed 2 at Toton; improvements to access to East Midlands Airport, which is now the biggest pure freight airport in the country; and the repurposing of our power station sites as clean energy zones. Those projects will add tens of thousands of jobs—perhaps as many as 100,000—to our local economy, and represent a generational chance to break the cycle.

The uncomfortable truth though is that, were we to fast-forward to that bright future tomorrow, which I would very much like, we would have to bring in people from outside to fill those jobs, because our young people, in the light of their experiences, are not yet ready for them. When visiting schools and talking about HS2 and the timeline for that to come onstream, for example, we are not talking about theoretical people who will work in those jobs, but about the children that we see in the room. They will be the IT specialists, project managers, engineers, logistics experts, nurses, police officers and much more. They are the very children who we need to gear up, educate and skill up for that very bright future.

In Nottingham, we are proud of our record as an early intervention city. That is what we talk about when we discuss early years education. I would be smote down if I did not refer to my predecessor, Graham Allen, who is a national leader in that work. Programmes have been established in my constituency to help to develop new practices and change public services. When I was part of the local authority five years ago, I was very proud that we were one of the sites that won the

[Alex Norris]

national lottery community fund's A Better Start programme for our project, Small Steps Big Changes. I am really proud of the difference that the project makes to the lives of our children and young people. Our Think Dads! training brings dads into the picture in a way that they had not been in the past, with father-inclusive practices when they go into the home. I encourage colleagues to look at the family mentoring scheme in the Small Steps Big Changes project, which skills up people in the community whom neighbours look to for leadership and help tackling the challenges faced by families. Those people get skills and employment as a result, and are often better messengers than we are for some of the messages that need to go through to provide better starts and education.

We are halfway through A Better Start, and I am keen to hear the Minister's views on how it has done and where it is going. Has he had a chance to visit one of the sites and, if not, would he visit ours in Nottingham? There would be lots there that he would really enjoy. A Better Start is a 10-year lottery-funded programme—that is the best funding for any project in my experience—but it will stop. We will look at mainstreaming the bits that were particularly effective in Nottingham, but in the context of budget reductions. What will the Government's answer be after that?

The Labour party is committed to early years action. We are so proud of Sure Start, which is one of our great legacies. That is the principle that we need to talk about and the way that we should approach early years education, by giving each child the best possible start in life, through childcare and early education, as well as health and family support. Sure Start provided for locally owned and driven programmes, which were understood and were sensitive to the needs of the parents and children, provided greater support for those who needed it. A child's ability to succeed is shaped by their home environment. Sure Start was perfectly placed to improve and shape those environments. The cuts to Sure Start are not theoretical—the numbers are as they are—and we risk a lost generation. Whatever one's views on public finances and the big or small state, everybody knows investing early produces greater returns. I worry that we have a generation that has not had that investment. Our priority should be for those children to catch up, while we invest in their little brothers and sisters.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a great case for providing opportunity for all. The early years national funding formula pays a setting only 100 miles from Cornwall £1.39 an hour more for each child than we receive in Cornwall. Does he agree that, unless we invest in young lives to have the best setting so that pre-schools or nurseries can survive, potentially we are failing this generation?

Alex Norris: I absolutely share that view. This is a stitch in time saving nine: those savings are false economies. We could save on our budget balance in the short term but, fundamentally, the cost will be much greater later in the system, whether in criminal justice or elsewhere, such as missed employment opportunities. We can do much better, and plan much better. I am interested to hear from the Minister what the vision for early years is. The challenges are well known, and that is why we have

a broad political consensus. What will we do differently to break the cycle in places such as Bulwell, Bilborough, Aspley, Mansfield and Warsop? I look forward to hearing the Minister's response, and I am grateful for the time.

4.40 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to debate under your chairmanship again, Sir Charles.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) on securing this debate and on a powerful opening speech. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) for participating and making important contributions.

Continuously improving this country's education system starts with the early years. High-quality early education can have a huge impact on children's development, not just when they are in the education system but throughout their life. Our ambition is to provide equality of opportunity for every child, regardless of background or where they live, and to improve access to high-quality early education across the country.

This Government are therefore prioritising investment in free early education support to parents and carers. Disadvantaged two-year olds can access at least 15 hours of early education each week, and since we introduced the programme in September 2013, more than 850,000 children have benefited from it. In addition, in 2017, we introduced the 30 hours' entitlement for working parents of three and four-year-olds, which benefited about 600,000 children in the first two years. The 30 hours' entitlement makes childcare more accessible for parents and carers, saving up to £5,000 per child per year and giving them the ability to balance work and family life.

We are continuing that investment. We plan to spend more than £3.6 billion on early education entitlements in the next financial year. In April, all local authorities will see an increase to the hourly funding rates for two-year-olds and an increase in the vast majority of areas for three and four-year-olds.

Ben Bradley: The figures for children supported by free childcare are hugely welcome, and those for the increase in funding doubly so. Does my right hon. Friend recognise the scenario that I raised with him in a previous debate, in which, with the two-year-old offer in particular, parents earning more than £100,000 or a couple earning up to £200,000 a year may access the 30 hours' free childcare, whereas a single mum on the minimum wage might not be able to. I understand the balance that has to be struck. We support families who are working—that is important—but should we not support more families, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds, if we want to address that imbalance in earnings?

Nick Gibb: Those are issues always debated in debates such as this, but what is important is that we introduced the concept of free early years education for disadvantaged two-year-olds. We always want to do more, of course.

In addition, we offer financial support for childcare costs through universal credit and tax-free childcare. The issue, however, is not only about parents and carers of young children being able to work, safe in the knowledge that their children are in good hands. Evidence from longitudinal studies, including the effective pre-school,

primary and secondary education project, EPPSE, and the study of early education and development, SEED, suggests that the duration in months and years is more important for child outcomes than the average hours per week. Education and childcare from an early age can make a huge difference.

For example, both EPPSE and SEED found that an earlier start in childcare from the age of two has benefits for the 40% most disadvantaged children. The recent SEED report on age five found that, for the 40% most disadvantaged children, starting in childcare from age two, combined with using the 15 to 20 hours per week, had benefits for those children's verbal development in year 1 and on their overall achievement in the early years foundation stage profile in reception. The international evidence base is also consistent, finding that the quality of childcare affects child outcomes: higher quality provision improves children's outcomes in the short and the long term.

The early years workforce plays a key role in the delivery of high-quality early education and childcare. It is testament to them that 96% of childcare settings are now rated good or outstanding by Ofsted, which is an increase from the 74% so rated in 2012. The latest early years foundation stage profile results show that the proportion of all children achieving a good level of development is improving year on year, with 71.8% of children having achieved it in 2019, compared with 51.7% in 2013.

That progress is welcome, but too many children still fall behind. I take on board all the points made by the hon. Member for Nottingham North. The gap between children eligible for free school meals and their peers has narrowed overall since 2013, but still too many finish their reception year without the early communication and literacy skills that they need to do well. Early years education, including in the reception year, presents a key opportunity to close the gaps referred to by the hon. Gentleman in his speech.

We have piloted and consulted on an important package of reforms to the early years foundation stage statutory framework which sets the standards for education, development and care for children from birth to five. Revisions to the early learning goals and education programmes will see greater focus on language and vocabulary development, which is key to tackling the word gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. Our proposed reforms are intended to reduce workload and to free up teachers to spend more time teaching, interacting with and supporting children—disadvantaged children in particular—to ensure that they are developing the rich vocabulary, skills and behaviours that they need to succeed when they start school. Our consultation on those reforms closed on 31 January, and we plan to publish a response in the spring. Alongside that, we are revising the early years curriculum guidance from birth to reception, to ensure that teachers and practitioners have the right information to support children and to give them rich activities and experiences on a daily basis. We have also invited schools to opt in voluntarily to implement the reforms from this September, a year ahead of the full roll-out planned for September 2021.

Alongside changes to the curriculum, we are committed to supporting the early years workforce to develop the appropriate skills and experience to improve outcomes.

That includes an investment of £26 million to set up a network of English hubs, to strengthen the teaching of phonics and early language in schools around the country. We continue to support graduates joining the early years sector through the early years initial teacher training, including with fees, bursaries and employer incentives.

Since the publication of the early years workforce strategy in 2017, the Department has worked closely with the early years sector to deliver our commitments to support employers to attract, retain and develop early years practitioners, including more robust levels 2 and 3 qualifications, and a new early years T-level qualification that will be available this year. There is growing evidence that investing in professional development is key to improving those skills, which is why we are investing £20 million through our early years professional development programme to provide early language, literacy and maths training for the pre-reception workforce in disadvantaged areas.

As I said earlier, what happens in a child's home is hugely important. What happens before they start school can have a huge influence on later outcomes, and the quality of the home learning environment is a key predictor of a child's early language ability and future success—that was referred to by all hon. Members participating in this debate. We cannot consider improving early education in isolation. Unfortunately, children from some low-income homes are more likely to arrive at school with below-average language skills, leaving them at an educational disadvantage from the start.

We have therefore launched Hungry Little Minds, a three-year campaign to encourage parents to engage in activities that support their child's early development and set them up for school and beyond. The campaign, working with partners from across the public, voluntary and private sectors, promotes simple everyday things that every parent can do.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I am sure the Minister will be aware that Sure Start did exactly that. In Barnsley, we have lost 14 Sure Starts in the last decade—that is 73% of provision in my borough, which has had the worst cuts in the country. When will early years funding be back to its pre-2010 levels?

Nick Gibb: We have already announced a £66 million increase in funding for early years—I referred to that when I made the point that there will be increases in the hourly rates to local authorities up and down the country.

I want to conclude the debate by re-emphasising the importance we attach to the early years sector in improving outcomes, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. That is why we introduced the entitlements to free childcare; it is also why we are reforming the early years foundation stage profile and the guidance on the curriculum. A Better Start, the programme raised by the hon. Member for Nottingham North, is hugely exciting—in central Government we look to it as an innovative approach, building on the evidence base, and we look forward hugely to the evidence that it produces, which we can learn from right across the country.

Question put and agreed to.

4.51 pm

Sitting suspended.

British Steel Industry

4.55 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the British steel industry.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I am pleased to have secured this debate, particularly ahead of the Budget tomorrow, and at what feels like a critical juncture for our industry, and for the entire manufacturing sector that our industry underpins. The Budget is the first major fiscal event since 2018 and the first test of the Government's promises to the British people, particularly to all their new voters from industrial areas. Today we will make the case to the Government that now is the moment to offer that long-overdue commitment to the steel industry, in order for that 21st century foundation industry to continue delivering for Britain.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does he agree that what is required is long-term planning? Following the mothballing of Orb in December, we are in a situation where an electrical steel producer is not producing steel that would be ideal for the green industrial revolution?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; it is completely absurd to have a Government who on the one hand are committed to decarbonising our economy, but who on the other hand are failing to support Orb, which could play a major role in electric vehicles, which play a major role in decarbonising our economy. It seems that the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing.

The Government must recognise the strategic importance of steel to our country's future. They must also recognise that steel must be front and centre of their so-called levelling-up agenda if they are at all serious about tackling regional inequalities.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Liberty Steel recently announced the loss of 350 jobs in south Yorkshire, due to "challenging" market circumstances. Does he agree that is concerning, because those are traditionally well-paid manufacturing jobs, in comparison with the low-wage sectors that tend to dominate the local economy?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have to mention today's very bad news of 500 job losses announced by Tata Steel, which shows that we are back at square one. We do not seem to have learned anything from previous years. Industries need a Government who will proactively work in partnership to produce a policy environment and market environment conducive to investment and to those businesses thriving.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The excellent "Steel 2020" report contains a brilliant quote, on page 28:

"Government procurement and other incentives should be used to increase domestic steel content in manufacturing and construction...there is clearly a significant market opportunity."

Is tomorrow's Budget not a brilliant opportunity to support steel?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need a patriotic procurement policy. We need procurement that gives the right weighting to local value. Let us look at big opportunities such as HS2—2 million tonnes of steel. How much of that steel will be British? Let us ensure that every single Government Department and HS2 are signed up to the steel charter.

The UK economy cannot stand up without a backbone made of steel. It certainly will not be able to level up if it is not able to stand up. Steel underpins our everyday lives, from the houses we live in to the offices we work in; the trains, buses and cars we travel in; and the major infrastructure projects, such as HS2 and the possible Heathrow expansion. It is crucial for our defence industry and to our national security. I hear people say that steel is a sunset industry. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is not a sunset industry; it is an industry of the present and of the future. It underpins our entire manufacturing base, from automotive to construction, aerospace and so much more.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does he agree that we cannot just carry on managing decline and that we must invest for the long term? Once a plant goes, it is gone; very rarely do they come back into operation.

Stephen Kinnock: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of course, we saw the tragedy of Redcar: once the blast furnace is turned off, that is it. In my opinion, that was an act of industrial vandalism. We must ensure that we take into account the cost of doing nothing. The cost to the Government and the British taxpayer of closing these businesses down is astronomical, so let us have a proactive industrial policy based on investment, and let us use tomorrow's Budget to deliver that.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing such an important debate. The uncertainty about steel production in Newport, with the closure of Orb and the ongoing nervousness at Llanwern and Liberty, has had a huge impact on jobs in my city and the surrounding areas. Does he agree that we need to secure a level playing field for UK steel producers by addressing the energy price disparity, preventing steel dumping and investing in research and development, so that the British steel sector can thrive globally?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is about having a policy environment that is conducive to driving investment. Businesses are looking for a partnership with the Government. As she rightly says, the cost of energy in this country compared with what the French and the Germans pay means that our steelworkers are competing with one hand tied behind their back. They need a British Government who are on their side.

Let us not forget the tremendous value that the steel industry generates for the British economy. It produces 7.3 million tonnes of steel a year, which is around 65% of the UK's annual requirement. It employs 32,600 people directly in the UK and supports a further 41,000 through the supply chain. It makes a £2.8 billion direct contribution to UK GDP and supports a further £3.6 billion through the supply chain, and it makes a £2.5 billion

direct contribution to our balance of trade. Steel is also integral to the greening of our economy. It is used in wind turbines, tidal lagoons and electric vehicles, and of course it is far cleaner to make our own steel here than to import it from places such as China, where steel production is much dirtier and the carbon footprint of transportation is huge.

Although we can be immensely proud of the contribution that our industry and its workers make, we must reflect on the sector's recent struggles. UK manufacturing has been in decline, dropping from 30% of GDP in the 1970s to just 9% today, and the UK's shift towards a city-centric, service-based economy means it is now the most geographically unequal country in northern Europe. We have the richest area in the whole of northern Europe—London—but also the five least prosperous, with west Wales and the valleys the poorest of all.

Let us not forget that steel jobs are good jobs, paying an average salary of £36,000, which is 36% higher than the regional average in Wales. Port Talbot provides 4,000 such jobs. The wider supply chain benefits are even greater, and the sense of local pride that our community feels in providing the very backbone of the UK economy is immeasurable. However, since 2010 our steel industry has been abandoned by the UK Government, leaving us trying to compete with one hand tied behind our back. After 10 years of Tory austerity, our community has also been left to fend for itself as a result of the money that has been taken out of our local economy.

The lowest ebb for our local steelworks in Port Talbot came in 2016, which marked the height of the steel crisis. A number of market forces combined to set the hares running: the UK had some of the highest electricity prices in Europe, which have gone on to cost the sector £200 million since 2016; business rates were through the roof, five to 10 times higher than in France, Germany and the Netherlands; and there was increased Chinese dumping in European markets to undercut European steelworkers. At one point, the UK Government blocked the EU from taking stricter action against the Chinese.

With such little support from the Government, all that came to a head. Leading the march for steelworkers as they always do, Community and other steel unions flew a delegation to Mumbai, which I was fortunate enough to be part of. In the midst of a crisis that nearly led to the loss of 4,000 jobs in Port Talbot, our community fought tooth and nail to make Tata Steel recognise that these were real people with real families to look after, not just numbers on a spreadsheet.

Mark Tami: There is an important point here: these are not workers who have refused to change; in fact, they are quite the reverse. They have been at the cutting edge. They want to do everything to make the plants as efficient as possible, but with all these other factors counting against them, there has to be a point where something changes.

Stephen Kinnoch: I fully agree. British steelmakers make the best steel that money can buy; of that, there is no doubt whatsoever. Look at the flexibility they showed over the divestment of the pension scheme, when many steelworkers thought not about themselves but about their families—their sons and daughters, and their grandsons and granddaughters. That shows the passion and commitment of our steelworkers and their willingness

to be flexible. I pay tribute to the steel unions, and to Roy Rickhuss and Community for their leadership in making that happen.

Our endeavour at the time paid off. Tata Steel decided against closing or selling the business, and in exchange the workforce showed incredible sacrifice by voting for the divestment of the pension scheme. In return, Tata Steel put forward a substantial investment plan and promised that there would not be a single compulsory redundancy in the coming years.

Fast-forward four years and we are stuck at square one. While electricity prices and business rates continue to be a thorn in the side of our steel sector, Brexit and Donald Trump's section 232 steel tariffs are combining to create a hostile policy and market environment once again. Some 70% of UK steel exports go to the EU, and a basic trade agreement with the EU could cost the industry £70 million a year through additional border checks. Although Trump's tariffs were aimed at punishing China for illegal dumping, they ended up severely damaging the UK's US exports, which have dropped by 30%. Exports of long products such as rods, bars, rails and construction materials were hit particularly hard, falling by as much as 60%. I am sure the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) will wish to say something about that.

These are tough times. It is important for steelworkers in my constituency and across the country that Tata Steel keeps its part of the bargain by continuing to invest in the long-term future of UK steel making. Our steelworkers, who make the best steel that money can buy, are crying out for UK Government support. It is time the Government put their money where their mouth is and backed this essential British industry. We need a Budget for steel—a Budget that really does level up.

First, the Government must take specific action to reduce UK industrial energy prices in order to move the steel sector's costs in line with its European competitors. The Government's energy intensive compensation scheme barely touches the surface; it deals with the symptoms but not the cause of the problem. UK steelmakers still pay 80% more for energy than their French counterparts, and 62% more than German companies.

Will the Minister commit to studying and delivering on the nine recommendations in UK Steel's "The Energy Price Gap" report? They include providing 100% compensation for the indirect costs of the carbon price support mechanism, enabling energy-intensive industries to buy energy collectively, and providing an exemption from capacity market costs. It is worth noting that any savings on electricity prices would be reinvested in the recently announced clean steel fund and would deliver £750 million of investment in the sector over the next decade.

Secondly, the Government must back business rates reform to drive capital investment in industry. Will the Minister commit to removing plant and machinery from rates calculations? Thirdly, the Government must maximise opportunities for UK steel in major infrastructure projects by introducing measures to increase the amount of UK steel purchased by those projects. Will the Minister back calls for HS2 to sign UK Steel's steel charter, and will he recognise the potential for the Government's steel pipeline to support 6,000 new steelworker jobs and contribute £3.3 billion to the economy if every Government project used British steel?

[Stephen Kinnock]

Fourthly, will the Minister commit to using the estimated £200 million in returned moneys from the EU research fund for coal and steel post Brexit to boost UK steel sector innovation? Fifthly, will the Minister commit to removing Donald Trump's section 232 tariffs from day one of the UK-US trade negotiations? Finally, will the Minister commit to delivering on a sector deal for steel? Aerospace, automotive and construction all have sector deals, yet the industry that underpins our entire manufacturing base—the steel industry—does not. That really is a travesty.

Steel is very much a 21st century industry that forms the backbone of the British economy. That fact must be reflected in tomorrow's Budget. The Community union is set to launch a new campaign called "Britain, we need our steel", because Community knows that the UK relies on UK steel every bit as much as its members and the steelworkers in my constituency do.

My constituents and their families, and steelworkers and their families across the length and breadth of our country, are not asking for charity; they are asking for a fair crack of the whip. They are men and women of steel who want the opportunity to compete without one hand tied behind their back and a chance to continue to serve their country by producing more of the best steel around for generations to come. I truly hope that the UK Government share that vision and will stand up for steel in the Budget tomorrow.

5.11 pm

Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con): Thank you for giving me the chance to speak in this important debate, Sir Charles. It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing the debate just before the Budget, which is the right time to discuss this important issue. He is right to highlight that the steel industry plays a crucial role in our economy; that cannot be argued against. It is also important to note steel's regional impact. Steel is particularly important in south Wales. The Tata steelworks provide a massive economic boost beyond the Aberavon constituency in which it resides. People live and work in Tata from right across south Wales, including my constituency of Bridgend.

Wales is the UK region that employs the second largest number of people in the steel industry, and it has been reported that Tata pumps about £200 million a year into the Welsh economy in wages alone. That does not take account of the wider effects on local businesses and the local supply chain, many of which link their success to the presence of Tata in south Wales.

A recent study by Cardiff University found that the total economic impact of Tata in Wales was approximately £3.2 billion. We must remember why that is important. Many communities in Bridgend and the neighbouring constituencies are among the poorest in the country. Any industry with such a dramatic economic footprint deserves our full attention and support. Our prosperity relies on thriving businesses big and small, so we must do all we can to keep them there.

The steel industry in Wales and right across the UK has gone through some real difficulties in the past few years. The hon. Member for Aberavon mentioned the decline and the difficult years, including the 32% fall we

saw in 2016—the largest fall since 2008. While the economy as a whole may have recovered since the 2008 crash, steel has not kept pace. UK steel certainly requires more support.

One of the biggest challenges currently facing the UK steel industry is over-supply in the market, driven mostly by China. The figures speak for themselves: China produces about 928 million tonnes of steel, compared to just 7 million tonnes in the UK. The most notable effect of that is to drive down the price and make it more difficult for British companies to be competitive in the marketplace. I am therefore pleased that the UK Government supported anti-dumping measures to address cheap Chinese steel imports, ensuring that British steel, which, as we all know, is the highest quality steel in the marketplace, can remain competitive.

Another vote of confidence in the UK steel industry is the recent sale of British Steel to Jingye, which will protect 3,200 jobs in the Scunthorpe and Teesside areas. I put on record my congratulations to the UK Government for the work they undertook to finalise that sale, which is a vote of confidence in the UK steel industry. Britain and the world will always need high-quality steel and there are tremendous opportunities over the coming years. The opportunities for growth are substantial, with the potential for £3.8 billion of domestic sales for UK producers.

The UK Government have also taken wide-ranging action to support the industry, including more than £300 million of relief for electricity costs since 2013; public procurement guidelines, with annual reports on the proportion of public sector steel bought from British firms; and details of a steel pipeline on national infrastructure projects worth around £500 million over the next decade.

Although I hope that the future is bright for the UK steel industry, particularly in Wales, we always can and should do more. I hope that the Government, as well as Members across the House, will work to ensure that British steel companies are at the front of the line for national infrastructure projects such as High Speed 2, and that British steel is at the heart of the Government's levelling-up agenda as well as our international trade deals so that the whole world can access the high-quality steel that only the UK can produce.

5.15 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on setting out the challenges facing the UK steel industry so effectively and forensically. Like him, I am a long-term member of the all-party group on steel and metal related industries, which I have the pleasure of co-chairing with the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft). In our group, alongside the Community and Unite unions and UK Steel, which represents the industry, we have been clear for a long time about the strategy we want the Government to follow to save our steel industry. That has never been more important than it is now, when we see a number of global and UK-specific factors aligning to create a uniquely challenging set of circumstances for steelmakers in this country.

Just this week, Tata wrote to its staff to say that its financial position was serious. This will be another critical year. The Government must act now to help the

environment at home for business and our trading relationships, whether they lie in the EU, the US or elsewhere. We have heard those asks repeated again today, on the eve of the Budget, which offers the Government a major opportunity to do the right thing and provide the sector with the strong foundations it needs to weather the current downturn and be in a position to ride the next upturn when it comes.

That is why, as other hon. Members have said, we need action on electricity prices. It is a fact often quoted, but still unresolved, that the UK's energy-intensive industry pays some of the highest industrial electricity prices in Europe. UK steel plants, as my hon. Friend said, paid 62% more than their German and 80% more than their French counterparts last year. We need a level playing field with our European competitors. As he also said—I do not apologise for giving the same messages, because our group has been relaying them to the Government for some time—plant and machinery need to be removed from business rate calculations to drive that capital investment.

As others have said, we must maximise the opportunities for UK steel in major infrastructure projects. According to the last tranche of data from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 42% of the steel that was procured was sourced from outside the UK. That is still not good enough. Projects such as HS2 give us an opportunity to do better and finally get properly behind the steel charter. We need to use the money that is returned to us from the EU research fund for coal and steel to boost steel sector innovation.

Finally, we must prioritise our steel industry in upcoming trade negotiations. Some 40% of all UK steel is exported, and it is very vulnerable to any deterioration in our trading relationships with Europe and the rest of the world. As my hon. Friend said, we have seen the impact of the Trump tariffs on our exports. Many of us feel as though we have been firefighting for the last five years. The completion of the sales process for British Steel is good news for the company and some of its workforce, given the huge uncertainty and the setbacks that there have been along the way, but we need the Government to be proactive, not reactive. The Government need to decide whether they value making things in this country and whether we want to become an importer of steel, not a maker of steel.

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is giving a powerful speech. Does she agree that following Jingye's takeover of the plant at Scunthorpe, there is a risk that the Government may say, "Box ticked—that's sorted. The short-term issue is resolved, and we can walk away and think about something else"? Does she agree that it is vital that that does not happen, and that we still have to address the structural problems that we are discussing?

Jessica Morden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We cannot be reactive; we have to look holistically at achieving a long-term strategic vision. Help for British Steel is, of course, welcome, but we need help for the whole steel industry in the UK, including the Welsh steel industry.

Just before Christmas, Tata's Orb steelworks in Newport—the only producer of electrical steels in the UK—was mothballed. It needed investment, but with investment it could have provided the steel for the

electric vehicle industry, in which the Prime Minister has repeatedly said that he wants us to be a leader. Last week, we found out that no Government support was forthcoming, that no suitable buyer had been found for the works and that Tata was now considering other uses for the site. No help or good news was forthcoming.

There is a human cost to the closure. As my hon. Friend said, the steelworks provided well-paid, highly skilled jobs in an area that needs them, but the closure also represents the loss of a strategic industry at a time when we need it. We are going to need electrical steels like those made at Orb, so either we will have to import them or someone will have to go out and build another plant. How did we allow that to happen? We need this steel Minister to take a holistic approach, rather than a piecemeal and reactive one.

I am honoured to represent a constituency that has a proud steel tradition, which includes the Llanwern steelworks. The automotive galvanised steel produced at the Zodiac plant in Llanwern is renowned for its quality across the world and is used by manufacturers in the automotive sector, which is closely linked to the steel sector, to make more fuel-efficient and lightweight cars. I have mentioned Orb, but there is also Liberty Steel, which produces hot rolled steel coils and floorplate coils for the construction sector. Sadly, in January that company announced job losses in Newport, which is a reflection of the clouds of uncertainty that still hover over the sector.

Steelworkers in my constituency take huge pride in what they produce. There is a real passion for the industry, and that is why we fight so hard for it. Reflecting on that, I want to mention Paul Horton, who worked at the Orb steelworks for 37 years. He was the main union rep for Community and did an excellent job, alongside other reps from Unite. He attended a debate on the future of Orb in this Chamber just a few months ago, when he sat in the Gallery. In that debate, I highlighted the contribution of workers past and present at Orb, and that of the trade union representatives from Community and Unite who fought so hard for everyone there.

Paul clocked up 12,849 days of work at the site and, although he was reaching the end of his own time at Orb, he knew it would be a tragedy for Newport and for south-east Wales to lose such a strategically important works. Sadly, on new year's day—the day after he finished work after 38 years—Paul passed away. He was a wonderful man and a passionate advocate for our steel industry. In mentioning him today, I want to reflect on the passion and dedication of those who work in the steel industry, and to honour his memory by carrying on the fight to save our steel.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I will call the Minister no later than 5.33 pm.

5.24 pm

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I add my thanks to the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for securing this debate.

It has been a huge pleasure, during the early weeks of my time in this place, to work with Opposition Members on steel-related issues. It is clear that all who are involved care deeply for the workers in their constituencies and across the country, and for the steel industry. We have had excellent news in Scunthorpe this week, with the

[Holly Mumby-Croft]

buy-out of British Steel by Jingye Group. We are conscious of the fact that there have, sadly, been job losses, and our thoughts are with all who are affected.

I echo the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Dr Wallis), who spoke incredibly eloquently and mentioned the Scunthorpe deal. I will not repeat the excellent points he made. I put on record my thanks to the Government for the support they have shown to British Steel since last May. Without that support, frankly, we would not have a steel plant in Scunthorpe; it is as simple as that.

It has been a pleasure to begin to work together with colleagues who are here today. We need to be clear that not one person in this country could go a single day without steel. The industry is incredibly important for our nation, and I look forward to increased support from the Government.

5.26 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this important debate.

As someone more famous than me said, this is “d’jà vu all over again.”

Since I came to this House in 2015, I have been involved in a number of steel debates. As a proud member of the all-party parliamentary group on steel and metal related industries, I pay tribute to the work that the group has done over the past five years.

I am the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw, where we have one steel plant left, which was saved by the Scottish Government in 2015-16. When many other steel plants in the UK are teetering on the brink, it gives me no great pleasure to say that. The UK Government must stand up for the steel industry and deliver a sector deal. President Trump’s decision to impose tariffs on steel imports from the EU has hurt the sector in Scotland and across the UK. Although the tariffs are aimed at blocking highly subsidised Chinese steel, they have adversely impacted steel manufacturers in Scotland and across the UK. Trump’s tariffs also pose threats to the whisky industry, which is ours and ours alone.

Around 10% of UK steel exports went to the US in 2017, but that fell to 7% in 2018 and 8% in 2019 after the tariffs were introduced. The steel industry is not a nice-to-have aspect of the manufacturing sector; it is crucial to all aspects of infrastructure projects in these isles. It supports a huge number of jobs—well-paid jobs, in the main—and feeds a supply chain that contributes even more to employment and economic prosperity. Further support for the sector could open significantly more opportunities for employment and growth.

It is time for the UK Government to match the ambitions of the SNP Scottish Government and get on with the sector deal, to deliver tangible support on energy procurement and all the industry’s other asks. The hon. Member for Aberavon went over those asks eloquently, and I will not repeat them, but they are things that UK Steel, the all-party group and I have been requesting since at least 2015 from a succession of BEIS Ministers. That is not good enough. It is time that the Tory Government took action, saved the steel industry and showed it a really good future.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that the steel industry goes wider than just steel manufacturers? For instance, last Friday I visited Lincoln Electric, a high-quality welding company that specialises in welding together all sorts of things, including steel plates. We need those auxiliary industries, which benefit the steel industry, to support more to happen in our country.

Marion Fellows: I really did not think I would be in such agreement with the hon. Gentleman, but I am pleased to say that on this topic, I am.

After a study into the industry, the UK Government encouraged the steel industry, as part of a planned industrial strategy, to come forward with a proposal for a sector deal, and it did. The industry made serious commitments on its side and asked for a list of commitments from the UK Government, which they have refused to sign up to—in particular, to decreasing energy costs for the steel industry. The industry sees that as vital if it is to compete with steel producers on the continent. The £50 million per annum electricity price disparity that the sector asked the UK Government to eliminate in autumn 2017 is now about £70 million per annum.

Even leading Tories say that the UK Government are a problem for the UK steel industry. The Tory Tees Valley Mayor, Ben Houchen, was quoted in *The Spectator* only this month as saying:

“The biggest problem with the steel industry in the UK is Whitehall...The UK steel policy and the BEIS team are absolutely useless.”

No one from the Opposition has actually said that, but this is what he says:

“It has become a sticking plaster. Oh, British Steel’s fallen over, how do we rescue it? Oh, now south Wales is in trouble, how do we rescue it?”

He says there is too much worrying about failure and not enough planning for success:

“It’s never: what do we want the steel industry to look like? What can we do as a developed nation when we’re having to compete with places like China?”

I have agreed with two Tories in one speech. This is something of a record, Sir Charles.

Alexander Stafford: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Marion Fellows: No, I would like to carry on—

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. It is traditional in a one-hour debate that the Front Bench speaks for five minutes. I have been lenient because the hon. Lady took an intervention, but can we move on? Mr Stafford, you have not been here for the whole debate, so I think we will just let her continue.

Marion Fellows: Thank you, Sir Charles; I am just about to wind up. The SNP Government have fought for threatened jobs wherever and whenever there has been a chance to save them. Unlike successive Westminster Governments, the SNP will never turn our back on Scottish industry. I am proud that they saved Dalzell works in my constituency; Sanjeev Gupta, the chair of Liberty House, said that he was very impressed with the efforts of the Scottish Government and the Scottish Steel Task Force to save that plant. No such commitment has ever been shown by a UK Tory Government.

I have taken on board the fact that I need to wind up, Sir Charles, but I just want to say one more thing. Brexit is only going to make all this worse, but in the past the UK Government have used our membership of the EU as a shield that prevented them from doing anything about the UK steel industry's asks, which it has repeated time and time again. Will the Minister confirm that he can do even more now that this Government have dragged us out of the EU against Scotland's will?

5.33 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Sir Charles. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this important and timely debate. As a long-serving member of the steel APPG, he has been at the forefront in fighting for the future of the steel industry and communities that rely on plants across the UK. I also pay tribute to all the members and former members of the APPG who have kept steel high on the Government's agenda.

The steel industry in the UK has faced many challenges in recent decades, particularly in the past few years. High energy costs and business rates, uncertainty among international buyers about Britain's future trading relationship with the EU and USA, and the need for certainty about Government procurement have all contributed to increasing concern within the steel sector. Despite those challenges, the steel sector is adaptive and passionate and, with the right amount of support, will prosper.

Over the past three years, I have met steel companies, trade unions and trade bodies. They have all had the same consistent message about what the steel sector needs to succeed. We have been waiting since the launch of the industrial strategy White Paper in 2017 for a steel sector deal to be implemented by the Government. It is time that the Government brought that forward to deal with the many challenges that the industry continues to face.

I will try to skip through most of my speech, because it is important that the Minister answers a lot of the points that have been made. I will just reflect briefly on reducing energy prices. That has been a major ask, and many of our APPG members here, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), have spoken eloquently about the need to deal with it. The high business rates are just ridiculous. We need plant and machinery removed from business rates; that would boost investment and bring the UK into line with international practice.

Large-scale infrastructure projects provide vast opportunities for steel. Projects such as HS2 contribute towards the 3.8 million tonnes of steel identified in the 2019 steel pipeline. The UK steel sector can and should play a significant role in providing that steel. Investment would secure 6,000 new jobs and an additional contribution of £3.3 billion to the UK economy. The Treasury should sign the UK steel charter and commit to maximising the supply opportunities for steel producers.

The section 232 tariffs imposed by President Trump should be at the forefront of any future trade talks with the USA. It is important that we ensure that the British steel sector is exempt from the punitive tax that was intended to prevent Chinese dumping. British jobs should not be put at risk because of Trump's trade war.

In July 2019, the Under-Secretary of State for BEIS committed to providing £66 million to support foundation industries, including steel, through the industrial strategy challenge fund. Will the Minister update us on the progress made on that, and when the tangible benefits should be felt by the steel sector?

The concerns of UK steel manufacturers and parliamentarians must be heard and addressed. The long-awaited steel sector deal must be published without delay, to allow the industry to plan for the future with confidence, so I ask the Minister when he will publish a comprehensive sector deal that addresses the concerns of steel manufacturers and parliamentarians. Our steelworkers are well-paid, highly skilled professionals, well placed to deliver the green revolution that our planet badly needs. I beg the Minister to give them the support they need to help us to do just that.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Minister, you have until 5.53 pm at the latest to sit down, so that we can allow the mover of the motion, Mr Kinnock, to wind up.

5.37 pm

The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Kwasi Kwarteng): I am delighted to conduct and take part in this debate under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I will not see 5.53 pm as a challenge; I will speak to the points that were made, and I would like to make some of the points that we really should air as a Government. I think there has been a bit of misrepresentation—a suggestion that somehow we are not doing anything, and I want to say a few words about that. First, however, I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this timely and important debate. It is timely because it comes the day after the important announcement by Jingye and British Steel—I know that British Steel is not situated in Port Talbot, but it is a big part of the story of steel in this country—and the day before the Budget, which we all eagerly anticipate. I am sure there will be more in that Budget about some of the support that we are providing to industry generally.

Hon. Members will have seen the announcement on the sale of British Steel to Jingye yesterday. The sale secured British Steel's sites in Scunthorpe, in Skinningrove and Teesside, and it is to be welcomed. I know that the Secretary of State has worked tirelessly to ensure that a deal was on the cards. I also pay tribute to his predecessor as Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who also worked tirelessly so that we could reach this point and celebrate the fact that the deal has been done.

Many hon. Members here have suggested that we have not done anything, or we are not doing enough, to support the sector. I notice that the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) suggested that it was—I paraphrase—"the evil Tories" who were doing nothing. That is a grotesque characterisation. I point out that in many areas this Government have provided finance and support and engaged eagerly with the sector. That sort of partisanship—"The Scottish Government do things so much better"—is beneath the level of this debate.

Marion Fellows: I do not generally intervene on Ministers when they are responding, but in 2015, when the steel industry was at crisis point yet again, the Scottish Government saved the Dalzell works, while many, such

[*Marion Fellows*]

as Redcar, went to the wall. If a small nation with a devolved Administration such as Scotland can do so much, perhaps the Government should think again about what steps they are taking. Fine words will not do. We have had them many times in the past.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for allowing me to continue. I will not get into a debate as to who is better or what the Scottish or British Governments have done. All I will say is that we have policies and have given funds to support the sector. We are completely aware of the strategic importance of the steel industry and remain committed to it. I will say a few words, to emphasise what has been done.

Jessica Morden *rose*—

Kwasi Kwarteng: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I have already given way, and I would like to make a few points before I give way again.

We have provided more than £300 million to the steel sector since 2013. We have tried to make energy costs more competitive in the sector. We are acutely conscious that steel manufacturers in Europe have slightly lower—in some cases, considerably lower—electricity costs, but then again, the other side of that coin is that consumers in those countries have much higher electricity costs than consumers in this country. There is a debate to be had about how that pricing structure should work.

Looking forward, we have announced the £315 million industrial energy transformation fund, which will give steel manufacturers finance towards using clean energy in their manufacturing processes. We also have a £250 million clean steel fund, which is also supporting the sector's transition from fossil fuel-burning dirty energy to low-carbon technologies. These initiatives and funds have all been announced and funded in the past few years. We continue to support the steel industry, and we engage with it through the Steel Council set up by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) when he was Business Secretary, so it is not true to say that the Government are doing nothing, or that we do not regularly engage with the industry.

Alexander Stafford: High-end steel engineering at Kiveton Park Steel in Rother Valley produces steel for aircraft, industry and precision engineering requirements, and is exported widely to Brazil, Mexico, India and China. How can we ensure that our trading relationships are enhanced by the benefit of British manufacturing and British steel products?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Exports are at the centre of our industrial base, which is one reason why we support the industry in the way I described. I mentioned the funds and actual policy engagement; we see leaders in the steel sector often. I am pleased that my hon. Friend raised this issue; it makes a change from fracking, which he often raises with me. However, this is of fundamental importance not only to our industrial strategy but for jobs. I have been struck and impressed by the human stories and the passion with which many MPs here have fought for their industry, their constituents and for the country as well, because we recognise that steel is an absolutely strategic sector.

On prices and the business environment, business rates come up as a challenge that steel companies have to deal with, but they are not alone; across our economy, business rates are often raised. In that vein, the Treasury is committed to reviewing business rates—we hear what people are saying. We want to see what mitigations we can introduce to make the business environment even more benign, to allow companies to thrive.

One extraordinary moment in this debate was the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw quoting Ben Houchen's writing in *The Spectator*. That was quite an interesting development. I speak to Ben Houchen, the Mayor of Tees Valley, regularly. He knows that he has many friends and associates within BEIS who are always willing to listen to him on these issues, as they relate not only to the Tees Valley but to the wider steel sector and our industrial base generally. I am proud of engaging with him on this, and I am sure that he understands and recognises that we support the sector and that we are thoroughly and absolutely committed to the steel industry in this country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) mentioned exports. My Department works constantly with the Department for International Trade to ensure that the UK has a suitable trade regime. Naturally, we have not concluded a free trade agreement with the United States as of today, but when we are in the process of doing so, the potential and real damage inflicted on our workers by steel tariffs will be a subject of debate. I am sure that everything will be dealt with in that round of conversation.

Stephen Kinnock: I welcome the Minister's recognition of the deeply damaging impact of the section 232 tariffs on our highly competitive steel industry, which is not state-subsidised, unlike China's. Does he agree that the point of maximum leverage is now? If the United States wants to enter into trade talks with the UK in a spirit of good faith and trust, surely it would be at the very least a gesture of goodwill to fire the starting gun on the talks by giving the UK an exemption from the tariffs.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman is tempting me down a rabbit hole. I am not here to talk about the specifics of our trade deal with the United States; perhaps he should call for another Westminster Hall debate on that. Certainly conversations around any trade agreement with the United States will centre in no small degree on our industrial base and on the nature of our relationship in terms of steel. He will understand that we are now in the process of negotiating a free trade agreement with the EU. We have not started the American trade talks, and I think it would be prejudicial to them—that is my own view—to start making demands in that round of conversations before we start the formal negotiation.

Procurement is important, and we have many projects that rely on UK-made steel, as the hon. Gentleman knows. I do not know whether he has visited Hinkley Point, but I had the honour and privilege of doing so only four or five weeks ago. When I was there, I was told that 100% of the construction steel and rebar for Hinkley Point C was procured in Wales. Port Talbot was an essential part of the construction of Hinkley Point, which they were very proud of. I had the honour of going round the site and seeing the extremely effective

and impressive amount of steel that had been imported across the river from Port Talbot to Hinkley Point. That is a classic and very good example of how major infrastructure projects are, even today, reliant on production in Port Talbot.

HS2 was also raised, so it is quite right to talk about the rail network in connection with domestically produced steel. The good news is that 93% of the steel used to maintain our rail network is made in the UK. Does that mean that we have the perfect procurement policy, using UK-manufactured steel? No. However, it is wrong to say that we have not made some progress or that we are not reliant on UK-manufactured steel in our infrastructure and our building, and through Government persuasion, intervention, agitation and conversing with the industry, we can improve the proportion of UK-manufactured content in our infrastructure.

The picture for the steel industry is challenging. Many of the concerns that hon. Members have raised about pricing and the geopolitical environment are out of our hands. I remember the biggest fact in the steel industry from the time, many years ago, when I was an analyst in this sector. In 2000, I was struck by the fact that China produced only 15% of global steel. Today, that figure is 50%. The hon. Member for Aberavon and others will know that Chinese steel is strongly supported by China's Government, and there is a history of dumping. The pricing framework has been under a lot of pressure from Chinese production. We must deal with that, and we want to, but it is a serious pressure that we should all be conscious of.

It is wrong to say that the Government have not done anything in this regard. We have plenty of investment and funds. Not only do we have resources and money, but we engage with the industry, for example through the British Steel Council, which never happened before. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove introduced that in 2016. We have worked with the industry. We signed up to the UK steel procurement charter, which shows our commitment to ensuring that UK steel producers get a fair, good chance of securing public contracts.

I think the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw mentioned the EU. No debate in this House has passed without mention of the EU in the past four years. This is a classic example where we will no longer be tied by the state aid rules of the EU, so there is ample opportunity for Governments to provide some measure of comfort to the industry, as well as support, as we intend to do.

I am pleased to have spoken in this debate. I have left some time for the hon. Member for Aberavon to sum up, Sir Charles.

5.52 pm

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the Minister for his remarks. I welcome anything the Government have done and can do to support our industry, but we have not really made much progress on the specifics, and the devil is in the detail. There is a crazy disparity between energy costs in this country and in France and Germany. That is the simple fact of the matter. We need policy intervention to give us that level playing field. It seems absurd to have an energy-intensive industry compensation package paying for the symptoms rather than addressing the causes. I urge some detailed responses to my questions, specifically about energy policy.

It is great to hear that the Government are reviewing business rates, but this crisis has lasted for five years. It seems incredible to me that we are still reviewing something when we know what the answer is: take plant and machinery out of business rates. On trade, a gesture of good will from the United States would be a welcome way to start those negotiations. I recognise that the Minister will not be in the room for those negotiations, but it is his job to champion the steel industry across Westminster and Whitehall. I hope he will be the voice of the steel industry in those trade negotiations. On procurement, there was a specific question: will the HS2 vehicle that runs that project sign the steel charter tomorrow? There is no reason why it cannot do that.

I welcome the Minister's constructive response, but the devil is in the detail. I would welcome detailed progress on those points, because otherwise it feels like we are using a sticking plaster over a gaping wound. Our British steel industry is the pride of this country and the foundation of our manufacturing sector. It is the pride of communities such as the one I represent and those represented by colleagues around the Chamber. I hope we will see that proactive response from the Government in the very near future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of the British steel industry.

5.54 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statement

Tuesday 10 March 2020

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

British Steel: Completion of Sale

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): On Monday 9 March, Jingye Group, a Chinese steelmaker, formally completed its purchase of British Steel Limited from the official receiver, securing more than 3,200 highly skilled jobs in the UK.

Jingye has acquired British Steel's steelworks at Scunthorpe, Skinningrove and on Teesside, as well as subsidiary businesses TSP Engineering and FN Steel in the Netherlands.

On 22 May last year British Steel entered compulsory liquidation. The court appointed official receiver took control of the company and together with special manager, EY, was responsible for running an independent sales process.

Upon entering liquidation an indemnity was provided by Government which enabled British Steel to continue to trade, and staff to continue to be employed. During this time the Government worked closely with the official receiver, special managers and all interested parties to support the sales process.

Securing a positive outcome for British Steel would not have been possible without the considerable efforts and commitment of Jingye, the official receiver, special managers, employees and trade unions.

The British Steel Support Group, set up by the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) and maintained by the right hon. Member for South

Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) also played an important role in supporting the sales process. The group comprised of Members from across the House of Commons, local political leaders, local enterprise partnerships, trade union representatives, British Steel management, and representatives from Make UK and the Federation of Small Businesses.

The sale protects thousands of highly skilled jobs and secures steelmaking operations at British Steel's sites in Yorkshire and the Humber and the North East. Jingye has outlined ambitious plans for the business, pledging investment of £1.2 billion to modernise sites and improve energy efficiency and environmental performance.

While more than 3,200 jobs have been secured, around 450 staff have, sadly, not be retained. The number of employees was negotiated with the trade unions alongside the new terms and conditions. The Government are offering their full support for those affected, mobilising the Rapid Response Service and National Careers Service to give immediate on the ground support and advice. This service will help those affected to transition into other employment or take on new training opportunities.

More broadly, the Government are committed to working with businesses and local government to grow and modernise the economy of the Humber area. Over the long term we will need industry in the Humber area to make a major contribution to national net zero and energy supply goals. We will shortly be publishing our local industrial strategy for the Humber which will reflect these ambitions.

We look forward to working with the new management team at British Steel to ensure that the company can realise its full potential. This sale is a vote of confidence in the UK steel industry. Britain and the world will continue to need high-quality steel, and British steel is among the best in the world.

[HCWS154]

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 10 March 2020

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**not later than
Tuesday 17 March 2020**

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