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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 24 March 2016

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

NEW WRITS

Ordered,

That the Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the County constituency of Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough in the room of Harry Harpham, deceased.—(*Dame Rosie Winterton.*)

Ordered,

That the Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the County constituency of Ogmere, in the room of Ifor Huw Irranca-Davies, who since his election for the said County constituency has accepted the Office of Steward and Bailiff of Her Majesty's Manor of Northstead in the County of York.—(*Dame Rosie Winterton.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Indebted Prepayment Customers

1. **Colleen Fletcher** (Coventry North East) (Lab): What steps she plans to take to reduce energy prices for indebted prepayment customers. [904290]

4. **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What steps she plans to take to reduce energy prices for indebted prepayment customers. [904293]

9. **Dawn Butler** (Brent Central) (Lab): What steps she plans to take to reduce energy prices for indebted prepayment customers. [904301]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): The Government want energy bills to reduce for all consumers, and one of the best ways to achieve that is by switching supplier. However, the hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) has raised an important point by highlighting the barriers that indebted prepayment customers face in doing so. The Competition and Markets Authority's report on provisional remedies rightly includes a recommendation that Ofgem should take steps to address those barriers, and I will consider the issue carefully following the publication of its final report.

Colleen Fletcher: The Competition and Markets Authority's proposal regarding a safeguard price control for prepayment customers is welcome and will go some way towards redressing an inherent unfairness that affects the most vulnerable people, but the authority and the Government should go much further. Will the Secretary of State commit to ensuring that prepayment customers are prioritised during the smart meter roll-out?

Amber Rudd: I share the hon. Lady's support for the CMA's proposal for the most vulnerable customers, a larger proportion of whom are on prepayment meters, and we welcome that approach to ensure that we look after those people. On smart meters, while some energy companies are prioritising prepayment meters, we are not obliging them to do so because the roll-out of smart meters is so inherently important to managing people's bills.

Liz McInnes: Will the Secretary of State tell the House, so that I may inform the 9,255 of my constituents who have prepayment meters, why her Department will not bring forward its fuel poverty strategy for another two years?

Amber Rudd: The Department and the Government take fuel poverty very seriously and we take steps to address that issue. We are reforming the renewable heat incentive and the energy company obligation to focus more on those most in need, who are those in fuel poverty. I ask the hon. Lady to reassure her constituents that we are absolutely committed to doing that and that we will continue to address the issue.

Dawn Butler: The CMA report exposes one of the biggest scandals of this generation: the £1.7 billion that customers are being overcharged. The recommendations in the report will not kick in until 2018, by which time people will be overcharged by £2.4 billion a year. The Secretary of State must oblige energy companies to roll out smart meters now, especially if the Government are to achieve their own recommendation of all households having smart meters by 2020.

Amber Rudd: I reassure the hon. Lady that rolling out smart meters is an obligation on energy companies, which are being regulated by Ofgem to ensure that every household has a smart meter by 2020. The CMA's recommendations observe that competition is the best way to deliver lower prices. We are making sure that more competition enters the market so that customers such as her constituents can have access to that and to cheaper bills.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Prepayment customers are among the most vulnerable in our society. They have fewer tariff options and find switching more difficult. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to remove barriers such as debt issues so that it is easier for these people to switch and get a better price?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The CMA investigation represents the biggest investigation into the energy market since privatisation, and the Prime Minister promoted it by referring the market to Ofgem and on to the CMA. The CMA has focused

specifically on indebtedness. We will look at its recommendations to ensure that the most vulnerable customers also have the option to switch and are not excluded from competition within the market.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): But the CMA found that 70% of customers were being overcharged, while those on prepayment meters represented only 16%. It found that there had been overcharging of £1.7 billion a year since 2012, rising to £2.5 billion in 2015. A cap is available for those on prepayment meters, but what about the rest of the 70% of customers who are being overcharged? What will happen for them, apart from urging them to switch?

Amber Rudd: It was, of course, disappointing that the Labour party opposed referring the energy market from Ofgem to the CMA. It is the CMA that has come forward with the recommendations, which I think is a welcome development. The right hon. Lady asks what can be done for other customers. The answer is that more competition in the market will allow people to switch so that her constituents will be able to have access to cheaper bills. I hope she will welcome the reform in the market that has allowed more competition to develop, resulting in lower bills for her constituents and everybody else.

Caroline Flint: That is misleading the House.

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Lady certainly should not accuse anybody of misleading the House—*[Interruption.]* Order. I do not require any advice from other Members. I am perfectly capable of dealing with these matters. If the right hon. Lady wants to insert the word “inadvertently”, that would make it moderately less disorderly, although she still should not chunter from a sedentary position in evident disapproval of the stance taken by the Secretary of State. That is rather beneath the dignity of a distinguished former Minister.

Caroline Flint: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I think the Secretary of State inadvertently—

Mr Speaker: Just withdraw.

Caroline Flint: I withdraw.

Mr Speaker: Well done.

Caroline Flint: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. Points of order come later.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I welcome the action that the CMA recommended for prepayment customers, but I urge the Secretary of State to heed the words of my hon. Friends who urged her to go further. I am sure that she is as angry as I am about the treatment of these customers. I am sure she is also as angry as we are about the treatment of 70% of customers who have been overcharged to the tune of £1.7 billion a year. The Energy and Climate Change Committee said that the Secretary of State’s

“Sudden and numerous policy announcements...lack of transparency...insufficient consideration of investor impacts...Policy inconsistency and contradictory approaches”, coupled with the “lack of a long-term vision”,

have raised the cost of investing in UK energy by £3.14 billion a year. Given that she is costing bill payers almost twice as much as the big energy companies, will she refer herself to the CMA?

Amber Rudd: Let me start by answering the key point that the hon. Lady makes about the 70% of consumers who are not on prepayment meters and are overpaying. The central way to address the 70% is to make sure that there is more competition in the market. When we came into office in 2010, there were six suppliers; there are now 31 new independent suppliers. Switching times are now down to 17 days and, with Ofgem’s guidance, we hope to move to same-day switching by 2018. All those measures will enable consumers to access a competitive market.

The hon. Lady’s comments regarding the Energy and Climate Change Committee are a random selection of some of the Committee’s thoughts. I do not share its views. In fact, I have been advised by a number of people who have attended the Committee and by major investors that they take great comfort from the clear direction that has been set out from the Government Benches for future energy policy.

Lisa Nandy: It is extremely disappointing that after this lengthy investigation, the Secretary of State has decided to blame customers for not switching and to let energy companies off the hook, so perhaps I will try another one. The CMA inquiry has also found that price comparison websites are taking tens of millions of pounds a year in commission from the biggest energy companies. In 2014 alone, they were paid £24 million. Following her announcement that she will not hesitate to take forward the CMA’s recommendations, does she plan to implement the recommendation to allow the same websites to now deliberately hide the cheapest deals from customers?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady has misunderstood me. There is no blame on customers and no blame is being apportioned. We are saying that the CMA has provided a wake-up call to the energy companies, which now need to take action to address competition within the area. We are confident that its recommendations will be key to delivering the competition and low prices that Labour so clearly failed to deliver before 2010.

Lisa Nandy: What about price comparison websites?

Amber Rudd: We already have a price comparison website to which we refer people. The “be an energy shopper” website will then give customers a choice. I urge the hon. Lady to take a look herself and perhaps consider switching.

Onshore Wind

2. **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What estimate she has made of the number of onshore wind applications made since June 2015. [904291]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): My hon. Friend will be delighted to know that we are delivering on our manifesto commitment to end new subsidies for onshore

wind and to change the law so that local people have the final say on onshore wind farm applications. As of 14 March, 64 onshore wind farm applications above 1 MW had been submitted across the UK since 18 June 2015, only five of which were in England.

Tom Pursglove: As the director of the national anti-wind farm campaign, I obviously declare an interest. What impact is this change to the subsidy regime having on ensuring that emerging generation technologies can come forward, which ultimately is what the subsidies are intended to encourage?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The Government want to promote a wide range of energy sources, including renewables, to help us to meet our de-carbonisation targets, while keeping the lights on and bills down. For example, the Chancellor announced in the Budget our intention to hold three contracts for difference allocation rounds over this Parliament, allocating £730 million of annual support over the three auctions for new and emerging technologies such as, very importantly, offshore wind. As he rightly points out, however, as the cost of technologies comes down, we will make sure that subsidies do so as well.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree with me and many of my constituents that it flies in the face of Ministers' claims to be the greenest Government ever when local people have a veto on onshore wind, but that when it comes to fracking, particularly for my constituents in Lancashire, local views are not heard or represented?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is of course completely wrong, because all shale applications are subject to the local planning system, so communities absolutely do have a say on every planning application for hydraulic fracturing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In my constituency, we have had many applications for wind turbines, both on land and in the sea. As an alternative, SeaGen has a marine project harnessing tidal wave power. When it comes to alternatives that protect the environment, does the Minister agree that such projects should be given prominence?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right that there are huge prospects for marine and tidal technologies, but they remain very expensive. The Government have supported some demonstration projects and are looking closely at all the possibilities. As they become good value for bill payers, we will bring forward proposals for how we can support them further.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Does the Minister expect the number of onshore wind applications to fall in the coming year, and what impact will that have on renewable wind's proportion of the electricity mix?

Andrea Leadsom: I can tell the hon. Lady that a lot of onshore and offshore wind projects are in the pipeline, so we expect renewables' share to increase in the coming years. She will be aware that we have announced further CfD auctions specifically to support offshore wind, so

we expect further increases in the deployment of offshore wind as the costs come down. That is an absolutely key requirement. As the costs have come down significantly, I certainly expect that it will be possible to deploy onshore wind farms, if communities want them, and without bill payer subsidy.

Mr Speaker: We need to speed up a tad, and I am sure that we can be led in our mission by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton).

Energy-saving Products: VAT

3. **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What assessment she has made of the implications for her Department's policies on energy efficiency of EU proposals to increase the level of VAT applicable to energy-saving products. [904292]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): The UK has applied a reduced rate on 11 different types of energy-saving materials since 2001. That remains in place and unchanged—and that is where we want it to stay.

Tim Loughton: For 13 years, Gordon Brown laboured to reduce VAT on energy-saving materials in the face of EU opposition, even getting President Sarkozy onside in 2007, but to no avail. With VAT on installations set to increase to 20% after the European Court of Justice judgment, does the Minister agree that the most likely route to allow the British Government to incentivise energy saving in the interests of British consumers and the planet is to vote leave on 23 June?

Amber Rudd: Let me take issue with my hon. Friend's first point, which was that there will be no changes. If he checks the Finance Bill, which is published today, he will see that VAT is not rising as had been foretold. One reason why is the Prime Minister's VAT action plan: he was able to go to Brussels and negotiate a better relationship so that countries can have their own VAT rates stayed. It seems to me that that is a very good example of the EU working for this country.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I would like to follow up on that. It is just two days since the Government accepted the amendment that I and my hon. Friends the Members for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) and for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) tabled to the Budget resolution. The Chancellor was the first in history who had to accept an Opposition amendment to his own Budget, and that was within a week of its delivery. Now we discover that the Finance Bill makes no provision whatsoever regarding VAT on energy-saving products. In fact, it is worse than that, because my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles has just received a written answer from the Financial Secretary stating that the Government are "still considering" their policy, and that the lower rate of VAT will continue only "in the meantime". Will the Secretary of State tell us whether there is a now a U-turn on the U-turn?

Mr Speaker: May I gently point out that a bit on energy saving would help?

Amber Rudd: Thank you for that advice, Mr Speaker.

Let me point out to the hon. Gentleman that while it might be only two days since the amendment was moved, Government Members have been aware of the problem and have been engaging with Brussels, as was declared previously at the Select Committee, so we are clear that this approach is in the interest of the industry. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's rather belated support for it.

Gas-fired Power Stations: Capacity Mechanism

5. **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure the effectiveness of the capacity mechanism for new gas-fired power stations. [904296]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): New gas is already coming forward. Since 2010, six new combined cycle gas turbines have been commissioned, representing over 8 GW of capacity, but we will need more new gas as we close our coal-fired power stations as part of our decarbonisation objective. We have announced changes to the capacity market to buy more capacity, and to buy it earlier, thereby ensuring security of supply during the transition, as well as promoting investment in new plant such as gas.

Jeremy Lefroy: Given that Rugeley power station, which is coal fired and based in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling), is scheduled to close, may I suggest that Rugeley would be an ideal site for a new gas power station?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) for her excellent work in representing those affected by the closure of Rugeley. The decision on how to use the site is obviously a commercial issue for ENGIE, but I encourage the company to discuss its plans with the Planning Inspectorate, which can clarify the process for building a new gas plant, and particularly how long it might take to do so.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Yesterday marked the end of an era with the sad closure of Longannet power station. I put on record our thanks to the countless folks who worked there and kept the lights on in Scotland for over 40 years. When does the Minister expect new CCGT gas in Scotland to replace Longannet?

Andrea Leadsom: I, too, wish to express enormous gratitude, on behalf of Conservative Members, for all the work that has been done at Longannet over the past 47 years. It certainly is the end of an era. It is astonishing that the plant was expected to last for only about 25 years, and the extension of that to 47 is pretty impressive.

As I have said, the capacity market needs to buy earlier and buy more capacity at a time when wholesale prices are so low and various plants are struggling, partly to ensure that new gas is available. The location of the combined cycle gas turbines will, of course, be a matter for individual developers.

Callum McCaig: It will be a matter for developers, but one of the biggest hurdles to new CCGT in Scotland, and one of the reasons for the early closure of Longannet, has been the imposition of transmission charges, along with the additional costs that are levied on generators in Scotland, primarily owing to their location. Margins are tight, and they are getting tighter. Can we remove this barrier to new gas generation?

Andrea Leadsom: It is extraordinary that the hon. Gentleman should say that, because Scottish consumers are huge beneficiaries of locational charging. He needs to look at the situation in the round. Scottish consumers benefit from being part of a Great Britain-wide energy market. Had the Scots voted for independence, today would have been the day when they were on their own. Issues such as the price of energy and the locational pricing would have worked very much to their detriment without that GB-wide market.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) for raising the possibility of a gas-fired power station at Rugeley B if the existing power station is closed. Existing infrastructure with national grid connectivity and a highly skilled work force could be used in that event. What measures are being taken to encourage the development of gas-fired power stations on sites such as Rugeley B, where energy generation has been taking place for decades?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has done a great job in promoting that idea, and, while I do not want to stray into the realms of telling a private company what to do, we would be very pleased if this company looked into the opportunities for establishing a new gas plant. The capacity market auction will give certainty to potential providers of new gas plants, and should lead the company to consider those opportunities very seriously.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Is it not very odd that the Tory Government never seem to talk about the 40 million tonnes they are importing from countries abroad that they cannot even trust? Rather than keeping the British pits open, this Tory Government have presided over even more coal imports. Which of the power stations will use that coal? They will not be using gas. There will have to be power stations to use that coal. Where are they going to be?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that a new opencast coal mine has recently started producing—

Mr Skinner: That is not a coal mine. It is opencast.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman must surely acknowledge that the time for deep coal mines is over, because of the health implications and the carbon implications.

Mr Skinner: In Britain.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman must be aware that my Department is committed to moving away from coal, through gas, to a clean energy future.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): The Secretary of State has produced no impact assessment to accompany her proposals to bring forward the first year of the application of auctions to the capacity market, but all estimates confirm that the auction will have to clear at a far higher price than has hitherto been the case if any new capacity is to be produced by means of this device, with a consequent huge cost to bill payers—an extra £20, according to some estimates. What does the Minister think the additional cost to customers will be, and can she look me in the eye and tell me with reasonable conviction that she is sufficiently certain that the auction will lead to substantial long-term capacity agreements for new plant to make that huge cost anywhere near justifiable?

Andrea Leadsom: I can absolutely look the hon. Gentleman in the eye and tell him that bringing forward the capacity market a year early—I am trying to make serious eye contact with him; I am not looking away for a moment—is absolutely in the interests of consumers. He will know that, with wholesale prices where they are at present, old plants are struggling to continue. By bringing forward the capacity market, we are giving them the certainty they need to ensure security of supply. If you like, this is an insurance policy on security of supply, and it is absolutely in the interests of consumers.

Low-carbon Economy

6. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to increase investor confidence in the low-carbon economy. [904298]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): My Department is committed to providing investors with certainty, and I set out a clear vision for this Government's energy policy last November in order to achieve just that. In the past month, we have provided certainty on the capacity market, on contracts for difference auctions over the next four years and on taxation for the UK's oil and gas industry.

Jeff Smith: As a result of changes in Government policy, Greater Manchester Community Renewables has had to scale back its solar PV project from 20 sites to four, meaning that 16 schools have missed out on solar panels and the local economy has missed out on more than £1 million of investment. It is estimated that there are 8 MW of stalled schemes in Greater Manchester, equating to about £10 million of investment. Is this not an indication that Government policy is in fact leading to a fall in investor confidence?

Amber Rudd: I do not share the hon. Gentleman's interpretation. In fact, we have seen increased investment this year in solar and other renewables. We have changed the subsidies on solar, so solar will go forward only where it is well sited and makes a good return for the investors. That is what we have to do as a Government, because we want to strike a balance between supporting renewables and managing consumers' bills.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Investors in low-carbon energy need clarity and confidence about the energy strategy for the next decade and beyond. The Chancellor could have provided that clarity by setting out the funding in the levy control framework beyond 2020 in last week's Budget, as 15 of his Conservative colleagues

reportedly urged him to do. Does the Secretary of State agree with them that he should have done that, as it would have improved confidence in low-carbon energy?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady will be aware that what the Chancellor did set out in the Budget was certainty on the amount and timing of contracts for difference, which was very welcome for the investment community. There will be further announcements on the levy control framework, but let us bear in mind that the LCF was the first of its kind and that it runs until 2020-21. We have said that we will set out how much will be available in future, but for now the hon. Lady will just have to be a little more patient.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Last September, the independent Committee on Climate Change warned that the Government's stop-start investment profile was undermining investor confidence and increasing the cost of low-carbon generation. The Secretary of State ignored it. Last month, the Energy and Climate Change Committee reported its concern that increased policy uncertainty was leading to increased risk premiums for investors, which will result in consumers paying more in the long run. Can the Secretary of State look me in the eye and explain exactly how she thinks this ties in with the Prime Minister's insistence that his Government are safeguarding the interests of future generations?

Amber Rudd: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I am quite capable of looking him—and indeed the whole shadow Front Bench—in the eye. I can also assure him that we are absolutely focused, as are the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, on delivering for the future generation and looking after bill payers. This is about getting the right balance and supporting renewable energy until it can stand on its own two feet.

Zero Emissions

7. **Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to enshrine the commitment to net zero emissions made at the Paris climate change conference of December 2015 in UK law. [904299]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): As confirmed last Monday during the Report stage of the Energy Bill, the Government will take the step of enshrining into UK law the long-term goal of net zero emissions, which I agreed in Paris last December. The question is not whether we do it but how we do it.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am sure we all welcome that change of heart from the Government thanks to the campaign waged by my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), but how does the Secretary of State think the Government's antipathy towards the renewables industry—and the fact that she has a Minister who is actively campaigning for Brexit—will help to achieve that target?

Amber Rudd: There has been no change of heart. I was at the Paris climate change talks and we fought for a high ambition. We ran the high ambition coalition meetings and we are absolutely committed to delivering on our existing commitments and to looking further ahead. This Government are committed to that and we believe we can do it better by staying within the EU.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): After we passed the Climate Change Act 2008, we hoped that other EU countries would follow with similar commitments: none did. Indeed, many countries, including Austria, Holland and Ireland, have made no emissions savings since 1990. We saw the result of that in the Paris COP 21 when the EU submission was significantly lower than the UK's targets. Can the Secretary of State look me in the eye from her position and tell me that we will not be acting unilaterally this time?

Mr Speaker: Order. May we have an end to this rather tedious business of requests for looks in the eye? I say that in the context of answering the hon. Gentleman because the Secretary of State's responsibility is to address the House. If she looks at anybody, she should look at the Chair. She certainly should not be looking behind her at the hon. Gentleman, a very agreeable sight though it may be.

Amber Rudd: Thank you for that guidance, Mr Speaker. May I point out to my hon. Friend that a positive element of the Paris deal is that other countries are now making commitments? I know that he is concerned that other EU countries are not making the same commitments as us, and it is correct that our Climate Change Act is one of the most ambitious, but I am proud of it and other EU countries are beginning to emulate it, although there is more work to do.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Since 2010, the Government have presided over a sharp reduction in the number of households receiving energy efficiency measures. Does the Secretary of State agree that meeting a net-zero emissions target will require a step change in the Government's energy efficiency policies? If so, when might we see that?

Amber Rudd: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman is aware of the EU directive coming in in 2020 to make all new houses nearly net-zero. We will be sticking to it, which will be a helpful addition to ensuring that new houses do not have the same problems that some have at the moment.

Fuel Duty

10. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions she has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the effect of the level of fuel duty on climate change. [904302]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): Questions on the level of fuel duty are principally a matter for the Treasury. However, reducing emissions from vehicles is an important part of this Government's approach to tackling climate change, and we are carefully considering how best to deliver that in a way that is affordable for consumers.

Mr Sheerman: I do not often argue for price increases, but fuel is now cheaper than at any time since 2009—less than £1 a litre in most places—which is having a terrible impact on the environment. More cars on the road means more air pollution and, indeed, more accidents. Should we not be thinking very carefully about that?

Amber Rudd: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we always think very carefully about such issues. Conservative Members believe it is right to protect family incomes and that it is welcome that the cost of fuel is down. However, we do not take it for granted that we can make changes to important vehicle emissions, so we are also investing in electric vehicles. For example, we have committed £600 million up to 2021 to support the uptake and manufacture of ultra-low emission vehicles, which is projected to save 65 million tonnes of carbon.

Biomass

11. **Nigel Adams** (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effect on the feedstock supply chain of her Department's proposals to improve the sustainability of the use of biomass in the heat and electricity sectors. [904304]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): May I gently point out, Mr Speaker, that as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I are mothers, we have eyes in the back of our heads and are able to make eye contact right around the Chamber?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) knows, mandatory biomass feedstock sustainability criteria came into force under the renewables obligation from 1 April 2015 and under the renewable heat incentive from 5 October 2015. The criteria will ensure that biomass is sourced from sustainably managed forests and provides a minimum 60% life-cycle greenhouse gas saving over our average fossil fuel mix.

Nigel Adams: I am grateful for that reply and congratulate the Minister and her Department on the UK's sustainability criteria for solid biomass being among the most robust in the world, but why is the Department holding back from further deployment of this affordable, reliable source of low-carbon power?

Andrea Leadsom: On 17 March, the Chancellor announced that the overall budget for three CfD auctions in this Parliament will total £730 million of annual support. That is for pot 2, which includes biomass, combined heat and power, advanced conversion technologies, and anaerobic digestion. We see the use of biomass in coal conversions as a transitional technology, helping us on our path to a low-carbon economy. We have already made significant commitments to the sector, supporting 1.6 GW of biomass conversions.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I recently met a group of EU foresters—it was a very unusual meeting—at a symposium in Milverton in my constituency to discuss sustainable forestry. They expressed concerns that our growing biomass industry is putting pressure on many countries further afield to supply wood, possibly causing deforestation. Will the Minister assure us that sustainability is a key part of encouraging this exciting new biomass industry?

Mr Speaker: An exciting gig indeed!

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend enjoys that kind of meeting very much. I can absolutely assure her that we keep the whole question of sustainability under review.

She will be interested to know that analysis of the 2013-14 sustainability data that companies report to Ofgem under the renewables obligation shows that all the reported biomass achieved the greenhouse gas saving target and met the land criteria, two years before they are mandatory. But we do keep this under review.

Shale Gas

12. **Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): What steps she is taking to prevent protected areas from being adversely affected by the development of shale gas. [904305]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): Shale gas could become a valuable new industry and it is in the strong interests of the UK to explore its potential. However, we are determined to protect our most valuable spaces, and therefore it is our intention to ban surface-level drilling in the most precious areas, including national parks and sites of special scientific interest. We have also regulated to make sure hydraulic fracturing cannot take place at less than 1,200 metres under protected areas.

Mr Nuttall: I thank the Minister for that reply. Although I am sure it will allay the concerns of some, does she believe that more can be done to extol the positive virtues of shale gas, including, for example, the new jobs and security of energy supply it will bring?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to point out that there are lots of benefits of shale gas. The first is energy security, as we could be importing about 75% of our gas by 2030. The second is jobs, as the industry could mean jobs and opportunities for the UK, with a report by Ernst & Young estimating that a thriving shale industry would create up to 64,000 jobs. The third is benefits to communities, as those hosting shale developments will see a direct share of the benefits through an industry-funded package, and the shale wealth fund will mean that up to 10% of the tax revenues from shale gas deliver investment directly to local communities.

Renewable Energy: Subsidies

13. **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): What assessment her Department has made of the potential effect of changes to subsidies on the predicted deployment rates of renewable energy by 2020. [904306]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): The Government announced a package of proposed cost control measures last year to tackle the projected overspend on renewable support schemes. As the costs of technologies come down, as they have, it is right that subsidies do so as well. We are fully committed to supporting renewable energy, but will do so at least possible cost to consumers and businesses.

Jason McCartney: I regularly meet the great number of businessmen and businesswomen in my constituency who are engaged in the renewables industry. Does the

Secretary of State agree that we must support this kind of innovation and entrepreneurship in the renewables industry?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that, and the entire purpose of subsidies is to give new industry and innovations in the renewables industry a good start. Subsidies are not intended to be permanent; they are about getting these things started and giving them a good start so that they can then carry on and deliver secure renewable energy, subsidy-free.

Retail Energy: Switching Suppliers

14. **Jake Berry** (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): What assessment she has made of recent trends in the rate of switching in the retail energy market. [904309]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): My Department has taken action to make it simpler and quicker to switch supplier. I am happy to tell my hon. Friend that the number of households switching supplier is increasing—in 2015, it reached a four-year high. The latest figures released by Ofgem show that 6.1 million domestic energy supply accounts were switched in 2015, which is a 15% increase on the 2014 figure.

Jake Berry: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply and for her assistance in my work with the Behavioural Insights Team on trying to create the receipt of the winter fuel payment letter as a switching point for those who are retired. What further steps are she and her Department going to take to ensure that older citizens in this country are encouraged to switch, because they have traditionally been the hardest-to-reach group?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is entirely right to focus on that older group, who sometimes are more resistant to switching. I thank him for the help he has given through his work with the Behavioural Insights Team and the Department on ways to encourage more elderly people to switch supplier through our communications to those eligible for winter fuel payments. The Competition and Markets Authority made proposals just last week that are designed to encourage all consumers to switch, including those over 65. The Government have committed to appropriate implementation of the recommendations, following publication of this report in full.

Oil and Gas

15. **Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): What steps she is taking to support oil and gas exploration and development. [904310]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): Last week, the Chancellor announced a £1 billion fiscal package to reduce the additional taxes historically imposed on the North sea as well as to introduce targeted measures to encourage investment in exploration, infrastructure and late-life assets. That builds on the Prime Minister's January announcement of a £20 million package of new investment in exploration, innovation and skills; a new interministerial group; and funding for the £250 million Aberdeen city region deal.

Kirsty Blackman: I appreciate the Minister's answer. Oil & Gas UK, the industry body, has said that we need a fourfold increase in exploration to ensure that the 20 billion barrels that are still there are recoverable. The extra funding for the seismic surveys has been most welcome and we appreciate it. Will the Minister expand a little on what other action the UK Government will take to increase the confidence in the industry and to encourage further exploration?

Andrea Leadsom: The industry is vital for the UK, and we will continue to support it in every way we can. I have already mentioned some of the measures. Perhaps I will just reiterate that, in setting up the Oil and Gas Authority on Sir Ian Wood's recommendations, we are establishing an authority that is welcome by the industry, that will improve the economic recovery of the sector, and that will ensure that we do not move to early decommissioning, which is all very good news for the North sea sector.

Tidal Lagoon Energy

16. **Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): What progress has been made on the independent review on tidal lagoon energy announced in February 2016. [904311]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): My Department has made good progress in setting up the review team and we will shortly be announcing the name of the individual who will lead the independent review. The review is on track to start this spring and, we hope, complete in the autumn.

Carolyn Harris: It has now been six weeks since the Department announced the independent review into tidal lagoon energy, and it is two weeks since the Minister assured me in Westminster Hall that the make-up of the review was being considered "right now". Why, six weeks later, has the review not started? Although I appreciate that the Department is probably very genuine in its desire to get this work done, we need the work done urgently.

Amber Rudd: I appreciate completely the urgency of the situation. However, we want to get this right, so we have gone ahead in the Department with preparing for the review. It is a question of appointing the independent reviewer who will lead that and agreeing the formal terms with them. The hon. Lady should be in no doubt that we appreciate the urgency of this matter, that we are serious about the review and that we will move with all due speed and keep her posted.

Energy Storage Devices

17. **Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): What progress she has made on developing a legislative and regulatory framework for energy storage devices in the UK energy market. [904312]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): Energy storage has been identified as one of the eight great technologies in which the UK can genuinely lead the world. More than £80 million of public sector support has been committed to UK energy storage research and development since 2012.

Last December, my Department published the document, "Towards a smart energy system", and we are urgently investigating the potential barriers to deployment of energy storage. We will be issuing a call for evidence in the very near future.

Matthew Pennycook: I welcome that statement from the Minister. However, regulatory barriers, some minor, are having a chilling effect on the roll-out of innovative energy storage technologies. Can the Minister give the House an assurance that the Government are approaching the removal of these barriers with the degree of urgency that is required if we are to remain a world leader in this field?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, I can absolutely give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. Very recently, I held a roundtable meeting with players in the storage sector and heard at first hand exactly where they think the challenges lie. I can absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman that my Department is working very hard to try to ensure that we remove barriers in the easiest and quickest way possible.

Topical Questions

T1. [904316] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): Since we entered government in 2010, we have more than trebled our renewable electricity capacity. A total of £52 billion has been invested in renewables, and more than 99% of solar capacity has been installed. In 2010, renewables provided just over 7% of our electricity needs. That went up to nearly one fifth of the UK's electricity needs in 2015, and we are on track to deliver 35% by 2020-21, exceeding our ambition of 30%.

Jeff Smith: At the last Energy and Climate Change Question Time, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) asked the Minister about the planned rise in VAT on solar, and she told us that the Government had "no choice" but to implement the European Court's decision. On Monday, when the Financial Secretary was filling in for the Chancellor, he told us that they had decided not to go ahead weeks ago. Did she inadvertently mislead the House, or was she not kept informed by her colleagues in No. 10—I mean No. 11?

Amber Rudd: I think we should just welcome the outcome. It is always unwise to underestimate my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who achieved a great victory for VAT and for solar at the Brussels meeting just 10 days ago.

T2. [904317] **David Rutley** (Macclesfield) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the best way for consumers to get the best deal on their energy bills is for energy companies to take seriously the possibility that consumers will quickly and easily switch to other suppliers? Will she therefore confirm that the Government remain committed to driving down the time it takes for people to switch?

Amber Rudd: I very much agree with my hon. Friend that reliable switching between energy suppliers underpins a competitive energy market and, above all, puts consumers in control. That is why the time it takes to switch has already been halved from five weeks to two and a half weeks. We do not want to stop there, which is why we are working with Ofgem and the industry to deliver reliable next-day switching for consumers, with an aspiration to do this by 2018. We will introduce legislation to achieve that.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): With fresh doubts over whether a new nuclear station will ever be built at Hinkley Point C, it appears that Britain's energy security is now in the hands of the French and Chinese Governments. If the French Government decide not to offer up more money for the Hinkley project, will our taxpayers be on the hook or does the Secretary of State have a plan B?

Amber Rudd: I can reassure the hon. Lady that this proposal in Hinkley Point will be going ahead. I do not share her doubts. To further reassure her, let me tell her that although Hinkley Point is an important part of our low-carbon future, it is not the only nuclear initiative. If she had paid attention during the Budget, she might have heard the Chancellor announce further support for small modular reactors, which could also be an important part of a low-carbon future.

T3. [904319] **Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con):** The Government's affordable warmth obligation has enabled thousands of low-income households to upgrade and replace their boilers, but there is no obligation on energy companies to upgrade the rest of the heating system, which is often required to make the new boiler work. That has left a pensioner in my constituency with no heating over the winter. Will the Secretary of State look into this and ensure that when energy companies are upgrading people's boilers, they are following through and not leaving people short?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend raises an important point. My Department is absolutely committed to taking steps to support those in most need. Since April 2015, boiler replacements under the affordable warmth obligation to which my hon. Friend has referred have come with a one-year warranty, covering the function of both the boiler and the heating system that it serves. I would encourage all customers who have faced problems to register a complaint with their installer or energy supplier so that remedial action can be taken. I hope that that assists my hon. Friend.

T4. [904320] **Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab):** In 2012, the Prime Minister stated that

"we will be legislating so that energy companies have to give the lowest tariff to their customers".—[*Official Report*, 17 October 2012; Vol. 551, c. 316.]

This has not been done. The Secretary of State has 11,287 constituents who are on prepayment meters, at a loss of £3.3 million to the local economy. If she is reluctant to legislate or to oblige energy companies to roll out smart meters rather than dumb meters, will she at least agree to total transparency in the energy sector?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady should know that there is no reluctance on the Government Benches to take action where required. It was this Government who took action in referring the energy companies to the Competition and Markets Authority and this Government who took further action with initiatives to help the poorest customers. We will be supporting the proposals from the CMA on prepayment customers, helping my constituents and the hon. Lady's.

T5. [904321] **Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con):** I congratulate the Minister on the progress made steering us towards a low-carbon economy. For business, this makes absolute sense, with many companies addressing the issue head on. The value of the low-carbon economy is now £122 billion, but we still need to make progress in tackling energy efficiency for our homes. Will the Minister please give us an indication of whether she might consider reintroducing a zero-carbon policy for our houses?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments and I draw her attention to two things. One is the Bonfield review, which we announced in June 2015 and which will report shortly. It is looking at consumer protection in energy efficiency matters, which is a really important element of ensuring that the energy-efficient items that are taken forward deliver what they set out to do. Secondly, as I told the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), the EU's energy performance of buildings directive requires all new buildings to be nearly net-zero energy by 2020.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): The Government have already offered ridiculously large subsidies to build Hinkley Point C. I bet the Secretary of State £100—proceeds to charity, of course—that that nuclear power station will not be built without even more public subsidy being offered. Will she take that bet?

Amber Rudd: Apart from looking people in the eyes, I am not in the habit of taking bets across the Chamber, but I am very happy to reassure the hon. Gentleman that I am completely confident that the Hinkley Point C project will go ahead, and it will not be the only new nuclear reactor commissioned under this Government.

T6. [904323] **Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con):** As the promoter of the Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Act 2000, I am naturally disappointed that, some 15 years later, fuel poverty has not been eliminated. I know that my right hon. Friend is genuinely determined to eliminate fuel poverty, but will she continue to consult widely on energy efficiency measures, so that we actually meet those targets?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He was an early campaigner on the issue. My Department is putting in place the measures needed to meet our ambitious target for fuel poverty, requiring us to bring as many fuel-poor homes as reasonably practicable up to the band C energy efficiency standard by 2030. As part of that, we have proposed reform to the energy company obligation so that we can support those most in need, and we shall consult widely in the next few months on our proposals to reform the scheme.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): Would the Secretary of State like to reflect on her earlier answer to a question, in which she may have inadvertently misled the House

by suggesting that Labour did not support the investigation by the CMA? We did support that investigation, but before it was announced we also acknowledged that the majority of customers were being overcharged. Will she, for the record, acknowledge that the CMA reports have now twice confirmed what Labour said—that the majority of customers are being overcharged for their energy?

Amber Rudd: Like the right hon. Lady, I would not want the House to be misled in any respect, so let us be clear. Labour supported the referral to the CMA in 2013, but then argued in 2014 that another investigation was not needed. It is that investigation that has delivered the results, which we will be legislating for, that will make the most significant difference for delivering lower bills for consumers.

T7. [904324] **Jake Berry** (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): I know the Secretary of State is aware of the horrendous flooding in Irwell Vale in my constituency on Boxing day. With that in mind, will she say what steps her Department is taking to ensure security of the supply of energy to flood-hit areas in Lancashire?

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): I took part in the Cobra meetings over Christmas, and it was devastating to see the distress and the awful problems that that flooding caused. As part of the national flood resilience review, we are working with industry to assess flood risk for energy infrastructure, and will be looking at options to improve resilience wherever we can. In addition, the Environment Agency is reviewing its advice on flood risk, and we are working with energy companies to ensure there is an appropriate response to any revised advice.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): Last Christmas saw the end of deep-mined coal in this country, and during the past year 32% of the coal imported came from Colombia. Is the Secretary of State happy that, when coalfield communities are still struggling, her Government's long-term economic plan is being fuelled on the back of child and slave labour?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman takes that approach. He will be aware that domestic coalmining has been in decline for the past 60 years, that imports are a great deal cheaper, and that it is for private companies to decide to choose the cheapest options. The Government have done all we can to reduce the impacts of the most recent closures, by injecting up to £20 million to help the directors of Hatfield to manage the closure of the business and £17 million to help UK Coal deliver its two-year closure plan for Kellingley and Thoresby, and by agreeing to meet UK Coal's concessionary fuel allowances.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I thank the Minister of State for the recent meeting she held with me in connection with the Able development in my constituency, which has the potential for 4,000 new jobs. Is there any news of the implementation of the memorandum of understanding with DONG Energy?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for continually holding my feet to the fire on this matter. I have had a number of individual meetings with developers to press for UK content as far as possible in the offshore

wind sector, and I am getting some very good responses. In particular, he will be aware that there is to be a strategy review of the east of England, which will include the potential for the development at Able. I am very positive about the prospects.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Is the Minister admitting, as she seems to be doing, that this Government are more concerned about bringing in coal from Colombia because it is cheap, even though it is produced by child slave labour? She has a chance to amend that.

Andrea Leadsom: Private companies in the UK choose their suppliers. It is not Government bringing in coal. The hon. Gentleman must understand that. This Government urge all private companies to look very carefully at their supply chain. They will choose cheaper imports, but equally, they have to stand up and be counted for their own policies on the conditions at suppliers. The Government do not purchase coal. The hon. Gentleman realises that.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Many people in Cheltenham share my wish to see a strong and vibrant solar sector. Reducing the solar feed-in tariff is no doubt necessary and appropriate, given the plummeting cost of solar, but what reassurance can the Minister provide that the new price will continue to sustain jobs in this important industry?

Amber Rudd: I know that my hon. Friend has been a champion of the solar industry in his constituency, where there are a number of businesses that thrive on the solar sector. I reassure him that we are still seeing high levels of solar installation, but they will not be as high as they were when the feed-in tariffs were delivering such a high yield. It is right to get a balance between supporting solar—supporting renewables—which delivers important jobs, and looking after the consumer.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Is it this Government's intention to build Hinkley Point C at any price?

Amber Rudd: I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware that it is not for this Government to build Hinkley Point C; it is for EDF to build Hinkley Point C. That is why we have put the arrangement in place whereby we pay only when the electricity is generated. That is the sound arrangement that we have, and the plant is due to start generating that electricity, when we will start paying, in approximately 10 years' time.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that in any assessment of the Hinkley Point project, she will look at the wider economic benefits to the south-west peninsula from what would be the largest civil engineering project?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is right. There are wider benefits to Hinkley Point C going ahead—benefits in the form of low-carbon electricity, in meeting our targets, and in security, but he is right that there are also benefits in terms of jobs and developing skills. It is a great loss to this country that under Labour we did not develop more nuclear skills and nuclear reactors. We are putting that right.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Junior Doctors: Industrial Action

10.33 am

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on what steps he is taking to avoid further industrial action by junior doctors.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer): Yesterday, the junior doctors committee of the British Medical Association, in continuation of their dispute over how junior doctors should be paid for working on Saturdays, announced that they would be withdrawing emergency cover during two days, 26 and 27 April. If the BMA proceeds with this action, it will be unprecedented in the history of the national health service.

Let me be clear first about the impact on patients. We will do all in our power to ensure that patients are protected. However, given that patients presenting at hospitals in an emergency are often at a point of extreme danger, the action taken by the BMA will inevitably put patients in harm's way. That the BMA wishes to do that to continue a dispute over how junior doctors are paid on Saturdays is not only regrettable but entirely disproportionate and highly irresponsible.

The hon. Lady asks what the Government have done to avoid industrial action. Let me be clear on this also. Consistent with our promise to the British people to reduce variations in care across the seven days of the week, the Government could not have done more in their efforts to avoid industrial action. Although both the BMA and NHS Employers believe the current contract to be seriously flawed, the BMA has walked away from negotiations not once, not twice, but three times—unilaterally thwarting the efforts, made in good faith, to come to a negotiated settlement on a better contract.

Time and again, the Government have implored the BMA to return to talks. Time and again, the Government have extended deadlines. Time and again, the Government have listened and responded to the BMA's concerns, making agreed changes to the proposed contract. The Government have provided every possible means to ensure productive talks. We have charged the most experienced negotiators in the NHS to work with the BMA. At our invitation, we have discussed the contract at ACAS not once, but twice. We have asked one of the most respected chief executives in the service, Sir David Dalton, to attempt to reach a solution. Yet, despite all this, the BMA has set itself against talks, refusing to negotiate on the few remaining points of contention, even though it had previously promised to discuss them. We are in the very odd situation of being faced with a trade union that is escalating strike action, despite having been consistent only in its refusal to negotiate on behalf of its members.

The country cannot be held to ransom like this. At some point, a democratically elected Government must be able to proceed to fulfil the promises they have made to the people. Governments cannot be held hostage by a union that refuses to negotiate. That is why, having exhausted every single option open to us with the BMA—with the BMA refusing to talk—and having listened to the advice of Sir David Dalton and others to

move on from the uncertainty that this dispute was creating, the Government have, to their regret, decided to move on and implement the contract.

We will very soon be presenting the new contract directly to doctors so that they can see for themselves that the new contract is safer than the one it replaces, is fairer than the one it replaces, is better for patients than the one it replaces and is better for doctors than the one it replaces. By seeing the detail of the contract for themselves, I am confident that doctors will see the strike for what it is: disproportionate, ill-judged, unnecessary and wrong.

Heidi Alexander: The Minister has spoken for a number of minutes, but he has not answered the question. I asked what further action the Government will take to avert industrial action and the escalation planned for the 26th and 27th, and there was absolutely no response.

This is a worrying time for patients and the NHS, and it is nothing short of a disgrace that, yet again, the Health Secretary has failed to turn up. If this walkout goes ahead, it will be the first time ever that junior doctors have fully withdrawn their labour. Nobody wants that to happen, so let me focus my questions on how we might find a way through this very heated and deeply distressing dispute.

Yesterday, the Health Secretary was reported to have said that “the matter is closed.” May I urge the Minister to think again? He should think about how it will look to patients if the Secretary of State spends the next four weeks sitting on his hands, instead of trying to avert this action. Was the Government's former patient safety adviser, Don Berwick, not right to have called on Ministers to de-escalate the situation? How does describing the junior doctor element of the BMA as “radicalised”, as the Minister did on Monday, help to de-escalate things? May I gently suggest to him that his tone and choice of words are making a resolution harder, not easier, to achieve?

The Minister is an intelligent man, and I know he will be talking to the same senior NHS leaders I talk to. Deep down, he knows that this contract has nothing to do with seven-day services and everything to do with setting a precedent to save money on the NHS pay bill—change the definition of unsociable hours in this contract and pave the way for changing it for nurses, porters and a whole host of other NHS staff. Am I wrong, Minister?

Finally, may I simply ask the Government to start listening to patients? The Patients Association has said:

“The Government's decision to impose contract terms on junior doctors is unacceptable...It is clear that the acrimonious dispute...is unnecessary and damaging.”

National Voices, which represents 160 health and care charities, said yesterday:

“We are calling on government to drop the imposition of a new contract”.

The Government have 32 days to prevent a full walkout of junior doctors. The Secretary of State may think that the matter is closed; I say that that is arrogant and dangerous in the extreme. This is an awful game of brinkmanship and the Government must press the pause button before it is too late.

Ben Gummer: I thank the hon. Lady for her detailed questions, put with her customary grace—and I mean that. She raised a number of issues, and I will deal with her first point last, if I may. She mentioned the Secretary of State's comments to the *Health Service Journal* earlier this week. We have been negotiating a contract for three and a half years and have reached the point where the counter-party—the British Medical Association—refuses to discuss the remaining 10% that is not agreed, despite the best efforts of the most experienced of negotiators and one of the most respected chief executives in the NHS. In his judgment, there was no further purpose to negotiations, because the BMA refused to discuss those points. The Government are therefore faced with a choice: either they allow the BMA, with that refusal, effectively to veto a contract, or they implement the 90% of the contract that has been agreed and make a decision on Saturday pay rates, on which they have provided considerable movement from the recommendations of the independent doctors and dentists pay review body. I suggest to the hon. Lady that it is not the Government who are causing or calling industrial action, but the British Medical Association.

Heidi Alexander: Look at your actions over the past year!

Ben Gummer: The hon. Lady asks both in her urgent question and from her seat about our actions. All I can say is that I personally have implored the leaders of the BMA to come to talks on a number of occasions, but there is a point at which it is not possible to continue discussions, first because the counter-party refuses to talk, and secondly because the BMA has promised to talk on so many occasions, only to renege on that promise at a future point. We have to move ahead with a contract that is better for patients and better for doctors.

The hon. Lady asked about the reasons for the contract and claimed that it has nothing to do with seven-day services and something to do with the pay bill. Not only is this contract cost neutral, but transition payment is being funded from outside the pay envelope. This has nothing to do with the pay bill; it is about recognising a core concern of the British Medical Association, the Government and NHS Employers that the current contract is not fit for purpose and needs reform.

One of the many reasons for that is to make sure that care can be delivered more consistently across seven days of the week. It introduces for junior doctors terms for Saturday working that in several senses are more generous than those afforded to “Agenda for Change” employees. It could be a judgment for the House as to whether it is equitable for that to be the case, but that was the negotiated position, as far as we reached one, with Sir David Dalton. I ask the hon. Lady and junior doctors to think carefully about resisting a pay offer that is more generous in form and in number than the one that is given to porters and nurses working in the same teams.

The hon. Lady asked whether she was wrong to say that this was part of a wider narrative to reduce the pay bill for “Agenda for Change” unions. I say to her unequivocally that she is. This has nothing to do with the form or payment of “Agenda for Change” staff. It is to do with the terms of contract and employment for junior doctors. It is about making a contract that is safer and fairer for them and better for patients.

Finally, I return to the point that the hon. Lady made at the beginning of her question. It is not the Government who have caused the industrial action. We have bent over backwards to try to avert it, and I suggest that we have done more than some previous Labour Secretaries of State to avert industrial action. The one thing that will help to stop this industrial action is clear condemnation from the Labour party. There is one remaining question in the whole debate, and that is the position of Her Majesty's Opposition.

The hon. Lady has been assiduous in holding the Government to account. She has been right to do so, and she has done so with the decency that has earned her respect on both sides of the House, but she has not yet told us what the Opposition's position is. I can understand that, although I do not agree with it, when industrial action is to do with elective, non-emergency care. The call for strike action on emergency care is of an altogether different order, however, and it demands a response from the Opposition, because this is about emergency cover for patients. The Opposition need to say clearly whether they support or condemn the action. If the hon. Lady remains silent on the matter, I will only be able, as will the House, to draw the conclusion that she supports the action. If that is so, it is a very sad day for the Labour party.

Mr Speaker: Order. I gently say to the Minister, whose emollient and statesmanlike tone is widely admired across the House, that briefly to refer to the stance of the Opposition is legitimate, but dilation upon it is not. I know that he is drawing his remarks to a close.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): That is exactly what I said.

Ben Gummer: I am glad to see, Mr Speaker, that you are in agreement with the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner).

Mr Speaker: No, I think the hon. Member for Bolsover is in agreement with me.

Ben Gummer: We have mutual agreement, in that case. You were right to draw attention to this, Mr Speaker. All I will say is that the strike would be more easily averted if Her Majesty's Opposition were to condemn it absolutely. If they do not, all that says is that Her Majesty's Opposition are in thrall to the militants within the unions and are putting decent members of the Labour party in an impossible position.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: There is much interest. I will start by calling not a medical doctor, but a generally brainy bloke, Dr Julian Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am greatly obliged, Mr Speaker, as always. Will the Minister tell me whether, having quite rightly balloted its members on general strike action, the BMA has balloted the junior doctors on the withdrawal of emergency care?

Ben Gummer: My right hon. Friend raises an important point. I believe that the legality of the action is correct and that the BMA is within its rights to do as it is doing,

but that does not change whether it is right or wrong. Many junior doctors who may have supported the BMA in the withdrawal of elective care will be profoundly worried about that escalation.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is disappointing that, as both the Minister and the shadow Minister pointed out, negotiations are not currently ongoing. Junior doctors are rightly concerned. The Secretary of State has promised that more junior doctors will work at weekends, while, at the same time, no fewer will work during the week. The UK Government decided this week that the best way to reform disability welfare payments is to listen to disabled people. Will the UK Government now make a similar U-turn on NHS reform and concede that the best way to reform the junior doctors contract is to listen to junior doctors?

Ben Gummer: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, but I suggest that listening to junior doctors on their need to have a better work-life balance, to ensure that the contract is safer for patients and to address their legitimate complaints about the way the existing contract works is significantly different from listening to the junior doctors committee, whose actions seem to have ulterior motives. All I would say is that we have listened consistently to the concerns of junior doctors both through the negotiators they have appointed and in relation to those they have raised on the ground. That is why we have come to an agreement on 90% of the contract.

Many of the issues settled within the contract were not requested by the BMA. For instance, one of the complaints made by junior doctors for many years is the fact that they have to book leave so far in advance that they often have to miss important family events. We sought to change that, and we did so in the new contract of our own accord. It is one of myriad changes that will make this contract better for junior doctors. That is why the sooner they have it in front of them—we are working very hard to make sure that happens soon—the sooner they will see that this contract is better for them and that they have been misled.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I thank the Minister for coming to the House today to set out the Government's position on this dangerous and irresponsible strike. Quite frankly, I am appalled by the fact that the Labour party has not condemned these strikes. Throughout the negotiation, the Government's door has been open, and the BMA was given more than enough notice before the Government were forced to impose the contract. In this negotiation, the BMA got 90% of what it wanted, so this strike is essentially about pay for working on Saturdays. What other essential public servants, from firefighters to the police, would get such terms for working on a Saturday? Will my hon. Friend please tell me what impact the strikes will have on patient safety?

Ben Gummer: We will do everything in our power to ensure that patients are protected. We have a very robust assurance programme, conducted by NHS Improvement and NHS Employers. We will do everything we can to ensure both that the number of elective operations cancelled is as low as possible, consistent with the needs of safety, and that emergency cover is provided. Withdrawing the number of doctors that the

BMA will withdraw in this action means that there is an increased risk of patient harm, and I am afraid that the BMA and its members need to consider that very carefully in the weeks ahead.

Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): It is clear that the Government are in a very difficult position, hence the Minister's attack on Opposition Front and Back Benchers. I have to say that, from my experience of nine years on the General Medical Council, I do not recognise the various descriptions of the doctors' profession that the Government have given over the past few weeks, including as being radicalised. We all know that this dispute should and will be settled not by imposition but by negotiations around a table. It seems to me that instead of using, at the Dispatch Box and elsewhere, rhetoric that has fired this up, Ministers would do much better to react to what the BMA said yesterday, which is that it wants

"to end this dispute through talks".

Why do the Government not get on with it, keep us out of it and just do what people expect them to do?

Mr Speaker: Before the Minister replies, may I remind the House that this is an urgent question, not a debate under Standing Order No. 24 or a series of speeches? There seems to be predilection among colleagues to preface whatever question they ultimately arrive at with an essay first. A number of Members say, "Oh, I have to say this." No, Members do not have to say anything; they have to ask a question, preferably briefly. That is all we want to hear.

Ben Gummer: The right hon. Gentleman should know that we have negotiated with the BMA for more than three years. We have a choice either to cave in, which would produce a bad contract—much like the 2000 and 2003 contracts, which we are trying to correct, because everyone agrees they are wrong—or to move forward, accepting the fact that 90% of this contract has been agreed. We believe that it is in the interests of patients and doctors to do the latter.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that this time the BMA has gone too far, and will he join me in calling on junior doctors to reach beyond the BMA and put their patients first and the BMA leadership second? Junior doctors are the future of the NHS, and they must play their role in constructively solving this problem.

Ben Gummer: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend, and we need this new contract to help junior doctors to achieve a better work-life balance, so that they can maintain their studies, training and experience in a better way than is currently allowed. We must also ensure that they are not exhausted by the contract, which is what happens under the current failed contract. It is in their interest for the new contract to be introduced, and I hope that in the coming weeks they will revise their view of whether this industrial action is truly necessary.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Thanks to the Welsh Assembly, my constituents will not suffer the anxiety caused by the future strike. Does the Minister

[Paul Flynn]

expect the public to support doctors who dedicate their lives to the health service, rather than the nasty party that opposed the set-up of the health service, and whose support for it has always been half-hearted and grudging?

Ben Gummer: It is unfortunate that the hon. Gentleman needs to use such language. The Conservative party is achieving better outcomes for patients in every single metric than the Labour party in Wales, which is consistently letting down patients in the Principality—an appalling aspect for people who are in need of care in Wales.

Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that the escalation by the BMA makes a settlement less, not more, likely?

Ben Gummer: It is hard to have any discussions on any matter with the BMA in good faith when there is an escalation to the withdrawal of emergency cover on a matter of pay only. That unprecedented situation makes our collective bargaining arrangements with the BMA very difficult.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): The Minister is also on premium pay, and he would be on strike if other Ministers were getting more than him. Is he aware that nearly all patients who are in work and go to hospital to be treated by these doctors are also on premium pay at the weekend? Does he realise that the Government are not in a very strong position just about now? They have had to retreat on their Budget. Does he understand that in this world, where nearly everybody in a trade union gets premium payments on Saturday, the same should apply to those in hospital by the same amount? Then we should pay the nurses and all the rest of them an equivalent amount. That is the Minister's problem—get weaving!

Ben Gummer: I have had this discussion with the hon. Gentleman before, and he is wrong. The Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration carefully considered this issue, and its proposals for Saturday pay for junior doctors were improved on by the Government unilaterally. We made a better offer than that in the review body's independent report, which studied other comparable professions. This comes back to a question for the hon. Gentleman: will he really turn down better terms for junior doctors, in both term and number, than those for Agenda for Change unions? If so, that is a very sad thing for the Labour party.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the most important people in this are the patients? They should be at the forefront of our mind, and it is for their sake that this wholly unnecessary escalation of action must come to an end.

Ben Gummer: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend, which is why it would be helpful to have an unequivocal condemnation of the strike from the Labour party, which would send a message from this House that the withdrawal of emergency care is wrong.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): A junior doctor at St Helier hospital states that “this contract is unfair, unsafe, uncosted, unevidenced, ineffective, unassessed for impact and risk, and unnecessary.”

With doctors depressed and demoralised, and with the revelation in David Laws's book that the NHS required £15 billion to £16 billion, does the Minister agree that the failure to resolve this dispute is putting a huge amount of unnecessary pressure on the NHS, and that the Government and the BMA must settle?

Ben Gummer: This is what the Liberal Democrats have come to: quoting the books of their own losing candidates—a very odd situation. I think it sad for the right hon. Gentleman to come to this House not having read Sir David Dalton's letter, which refutes every single one of the points he quoted at the beginning of his question. The fact is that the contract will be fairer and safer—better for patients and better for doctors.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share the frustrations of a former Health Minister, namely Nye Bevan? The BMA battled against him when he was trying to set up the NHS, leading him to state in this place that it was not his fault he could not agree with the BMA as the Government had never appointed a Minister who could agree with the BMA.

Ben Gummer: Reading Bevan's remarks from 1948, as from 1946, are a revelation. There is so much truth in them. The fact is that there are parts of the BMA that want to come to a good and constructive deal with the Government. The general practitioners have just done so. It is just very sad that this once-respected trade union is being dragged to this position by the junior doctors committee. It is doing great damage to the reputation of the BMA, and, in allying themselves to that part of the BMA, great damage to the reputation of the Labour party.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): If the Minister really wants to avert the strike, I suggest he writes to the BMA today with a list of the sticking points and dates on which to meet.

Ben Gummer: Sir David Dalton wrote to the BMA with precisely that list. The BMA refused to reply to him. He made the judgment that there was no point in continuing negotiations because it was refusing to discuss, in any event, the remaining matters. The Government have to move ahead. We have been on this for three and a half years and it is better that we move ahead.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It was with great sadness that I learned of the BMA's decision, which is not in the interests of patients and not in the interests of its members. I urge it to withdraw the threat of action. At the same time, will the Minister consider pausing the imposition of the contract, so there can be meaningful discussions? Those discussions have to take place in the context of a withdrawal of strike action.

Ben Gummer: I say gently to my hon. Friend that meaningful discussions require both good faith and a will to talk from both sides. That is consistently the case on the Government side, but it has not been consistently the case for the junior doctors committee of the BMA. The fact is that this contract is better for patients, the patients he seeks to represent. It is better for doctors, the same doctors he seeks to represent. Therefore, any

further delay would be bad for patients and bad for doctors. That is why we must move ahead with the implementation of this contract.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): The Minister's tone, language and approach today show how and why he has failed in these negotiations. I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) could easily teach him how to negotiate and how to avert the strike. Will the Minister please explain how he proposes to have more junior doctors working at the weekends, without having fewer working during the week?

Ben Gummer: The point of the new contract has, in part, been to try to achieve fairer rostering through the week and weekend. It is in response to the doctors and dentists pay review body, which took evidence from managers and senior clinicians within the service. It is their judgment that we, as Ministers, have to respect. It is not for us to make up new terms; it is to listen to those who have experience. We have been talking for three and a half years. Part of those talks were led by Sir David Dalton, who is one of the most respected people in the NHS. If he could not achieve a conclusion, I doubt very much that I, or any other Minister, would be able to do so.

Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): How many junior doctors are members of the BMA? If the BMA is set on this activity, I encourage my hon. Friend to start talking to those who are not members. Perhaps he could talk to other health workers, too, including pharmacists, and get them involved in trying to deal with this.

Ben Gummer: My hon. Friend is right to point out that not all junior doctors are members of the BMA. In fact, a significant minority are not, which is why fewer than half have been turning out for industrial action. The number has been decreasing with each successive strike, and I have no doubt that as we move to the withdrawal of emergency cover, most junior doctors will say, "This is not something I went into medicine to do", and will want to show their support for patients, rather than an increasingly militant junior doctors committee.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I plead with the Minister to respond to the comments from Jeremy Taylor, chief executive of National Voices, which represents 160 health and care charities and which has called on the Government to drop imposition and on both sides to get back around the negotiating table. In his words, if they do not,

"the only people who will suffer are patients."

Ben Gummer: I disagree with the gentleman on two points. First, we have been trying to get around the negotiating table for over three and a half years, but it requires both sides to negotiate, and I am afraid the BMA has refused to do so. When only one party is at the table, negotiations cannot continue. Secondly, it is not just bad for patients; it is also bad for doctors in terms of their careers and what they want, which is to

provide the best possible care for patients. That is why I urge all doctors not to withdraw emergency cover at the end of next month.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Does the Minister agree that whatever the dispute, the threat to withdraw emergency cover is one that nobody should condone, and will he join me in urging the BMA to withdraw the threat immediately?

Ben Gummer: I will join my hon. Friend. I only hope those on the Opposition Front Bench will also join him.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Minister has described those seeking to protect our national health service and their own work-life balance as being radicalised. Will he apologise for this insult to junior doctors and the English language and urgently seek a more consensual and inclusive resolution?

Ben Gummer: If the hon. Lady had been at the debate, she would know that I did not say that. It is important to understand that there is a wide gap between junior doctors and a few of the people who seek to represent them on the junior doctors committee, who have taken an increasingly militant view and whose motives, I would suggest, are not entirely in the interests of their members.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Given the BMA's completely irresponsible announcement yesterday that it was willing to walk out on even emergency patients, which seemingly shows that the doctors union is willing to put patients' lives at risk, will my hon. Friend look at how the law on emergency medicine could be brought into line with that for the Army and other such services to prevent emergency doctors from taking such irresponsible and appalling action in the future?

Ben Gummer: The new trade union legislation does not apply to doctors in the way my hon. Friend suggests, but I appeal to them and their consciences not to withdraw emergency cover and put patients at an increased risk of harm.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In Northern Ireland, we have become experts in compromise and reaching agreement. We have had to come to terms with difficult issues and compromise on many things. The Northern Ireland Assembly Health Minister is in talks with the BMA and junior doctors to find a tailored solution for Northern Ireland that is affordable and has patient safety at its heart. Does the Minister not agree that it is time to get round the table, meet the BMA and junior doctors and realise that compromise between all parties can and often does reach a fair solution for all?

Ben Gummer: The contract is a compromise. We have compromised in a series of areas to try and reach a settlement, and 90% of it has been agreed with the BMA, but in the absence of talks—one party refuses to discuss the remaining items on a point of principle—we have to move ahead with implementation. That train has now left the station, and we will be bringing in the new contract later this year.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): Seven-day working was a clear manifesto commitment, and the BMA's position is highly regrettable, but to implement it we will clearly need more junior doctors to backfill rosters, rotas and all that goes with it. For the avoidance of doubt, will the Minister confirm to the House that he has enough junior doctors to do that?

Ben Gummer: We are increasing the number of junior doctors and the number of other doctors, consultants and nurses over the next five year years in order to meet the increasing challenges facing our national health service.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Minister said that he had reached agreement on 90% of matters, including some that were not on the table, and he is to be warmly congratulated on that. Perhaps he has a future at ACAS. What my constituents would like, however, is for him to go back to negotiate the other 10%. Is it not the case that the junior doctors want a resolution and have said that they will negotiate? The Minister should square the circle: he says they will not negotiate; they say they will. Will he give it one more chance?

Ben Gummer: The credit that the hon. Gentleman has kindly given me is due to Sir David Dalton, who achieved the 90% agreement on the contract. As for the remaining 10%, his judgment was that the junior doctors committee would refuse to negotiate. At that point, the Government had to make a decision about whether to proceed or to cave in. We decided to proceed, which is why we will implement the contract later this year.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I worked for the NHS for 33 years, so I know that NHS staff do not take strike action lightly. The Government's failure to negotiate has fuelled this crisis in our NHS. The BMA said in its statement yesterday that it wanted to

end the dispute through talks. I implore the Minister to get back round that table for the sake of patients and every citizen of this country.

Ben Gummer: Back in November, the BMA said that it wished to discuss Saturday pay rates, and then went back on that promise—one that it had made at ACAS. That is something that, in my experience, normal trade unions do not do. In my experience, they hold to their word when they have made a promise at ACAS. Given that repeated breach of good faith, it is hard to understand how a return to talks would achieve what the hon. Lady thinks it would. That is why it is so important to move ahead with the vast majority that has been agreed, and introduce this contract, which is better for patients and better for doctors.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): What an absolutely shambles of the Government's own making! Will the Minister accept that in view of the language he is using today and the tone that the Government have struck—not just today, but throughout this week and before that—they have given the impression to junior doctors and the country that what they really seek is a fight and a confrontation rather than the resolution that the public deserve?

Ben Gummer: The hon. Gentleman is the last person to speak from the Opposition Benches. I note that he of all people—this saddens me—also fails to condemn this withdrawal of emergency cover. I am afraid that in the absence of that condemnation, the House will only draw the conclusion that the Labour party supports the withdrawal of emergency action in this strike.

Liz McInnes: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: That will come after business questions, and I feel sure that the hon. Lady will be in her place, perched and ready to pounce with her point of order at the appropriate moment. We will await that prospect, I am sure, with eager anticipation.

Business of the House

11.12 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Will the Deputy Leader of the House give us the future business?

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The business is as follows.

MONDAY 11 APRIL—Second Reading of the Finance Bill.

TUESDAY 12 APRIL—Debate on a motion on reform of support arrangements for people with contaminated blood. The subject of this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee. The Chairman of Ways and Means has named opposed private business for consideration.

WEDNESDAY 13 APRIL—Opposition day (unallotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 14 APRIL—Debate on a motion on national security checking of the Iraq inquiry report, followed by debate on a motion on diversity in the BBC. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 15 APRIL—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 18 April will include:

MONDAY 18 APRIL—Debate on a motion on the introduction of the national living wage and related changes to employee contracts, followed by debate on a motion on educational attainment in Yorkshire and the Humber. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 14 and 18 April will be:

THURSDAY 14 APRIL—General debate on the pubs code and the adjudicator.

MONDAY 18 APRIL—Debate on an e-petition relating to funding for research into brain tumours.

Melanie Onn: This week we remember those who died in the terrorist attacks in Brussels. It happened so close to home, which is an immediate reminder of how fragile our peace is, and of how important it is for nations to stand together against extremism in all its forms. I thank the House authorities for taking threats to this place seriously, and for the security guide that they have issued. I recommend that all Members note that document and share it with their staff.

I welcome the fact that today we have three women speaking for their parties in business questions. I shall be doing my best to avoid being hostile. When I found out that I would be standing in, I feared that I might have nothing to talk about, but I need not have worried. In fact, so much has happened that I have made my own list.

It has been a truly dismal week for the Government. Ever since the Ozzyszambles Budget, they have been in complete confusion and chaos. This must be a record for the number of Government U-turns in seven short days. First the disgraceful personal independence payment cuts were dropped on a Friday, with the pre-election

promise of £12 billion in welfare cuts disowned altogether by Monday; then, yesterday, the Prime Minister said that the Government would fulfil their manifesto commitment on overall welfare cuts.

Can the Deputy Leader of the House explain to me—in simple terms, please—how the £4.4 billion black hole in the budget will be filled? As my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) asked on Tuesday, if it was so easy to absorb the £1 billion a year U-turn,

“why on earth did the Chancellor introduce it in the first place and frighten the life out of...disabled people...?”—[*Official Report*, 22 March 2016; Vol. 607, c. 1394.]

Nearly 3,000 people in Great Grimsby on disability living allowance will be transferred to the personal independence payment, and they will have had sleepless nights wondering how they were going to manage. Will the Deputy Leader of the House now do what both the Chancellor and the Prime Minister failed to do, and offer her apologies for the stress and anxiety that have been caused to the hundreds of thousands of disabled people by this needless upset?

I welcome the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to his post, although I am not sure how grateful he is to have been dropped into such hot water. It seems that the claws are out already; and let us hope that he does not have a soft shell. Almost immediately after his appointment, he faced calls for him to step down as patron of his local Mencap branch because of his support for the Government's disability benefit cuts. He is also taking his own constituents to court to force them to pay the bedroom tax. He may be a new face, but it seems that it is just more of the same from the nasty party.

There were more U-turns as the Government changed course on Tuesday to allow the VAT hike on solar panels and the tampon tax to be defeated. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) on that major achievement on the tampon tax. She is a feisty campaigner, having become the first ever Opposition Back Bencher to secure an amendment to a Budget, and all that in her first year. We wait with bated breath for her next target.

On the same day, the Home Office quietly announced that it would no longer be banning poppers—so the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) can relax now. [*Laughter.*] Ah, the laughter is coming. I can hear it now.

According to the Education Secretary, all Government announcements are really just “consultations”, and not concrete policy, so may I suggest one more U-turn? Following the vote in the House of Lords on Monday, will the Government allow 3,000 children to take refuge in Britain, and when will this House debate the issue? There are 26,000 refugee children in mainland Europe who are travelling without a parent, relative or guardian. It is time for Britain to act in accordance with its best traditions, and to give those children a home and a childhood.

May we also have a statement on the country's energy security? EDF Energy, the company behind the Hinkley project, told the Energy and Climate Change Committee yesterday that the decision on the nuclear site's future has been delayed until May, and rests in the hands of the French Government. If the Hinkley project does not go ahead, there will be serious questions about

[Melanie Onn]

whether the Government can keep the lights on and meet our climate change commitments. Will the Energy Secretary come to the House and make a statement on what she is doing to ensure that this crucial project goes ahead, and what is her plan B if Point C does not proceed?

Many responded to the resignation of the previous Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), by warning “Beware the IDS of March”, but there is really no comparison between the two events. In fact, they could not be more different. The Ides of March marks the brutal end of the career of someone who was in favour of closer European integration, had filled the legislature with his followers, and was feared to be setting himself up as the unfettered leader of his country. That is not quite the record of the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green.

Dr Coffey: I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) about what happened in Brussels. She is right to point out that the sentiments of the British people are with the victims there. It is important that we should be alert but not alarmed, and we recognise the ongoing work of the police and the domestic services to ensure that we are all safe.

I should like to pay tribute to Milburn Talbot, who retires as Deputy Principal Doorkeeper today. I know that he will be much missed, including from his role in the parliamentary choir: his dulcet tones have echoed out across the chapel and many concert halls. I first met Milburn, and his lovely wife Christine, back in 2003 at a garden party. His wife is a senior county councillor in Lincolnshire, and he was, rightly, supporting her. After his service in the armed forces and to this House and his dedication to democracy, I really wish Milburn well in the next stage of his life. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]

I welcome the hon. Members for Great Grimsby and for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) to their places. My constituency and that of the hon. Member for Great Grimsby have similar attributes in that we are on the coast, where fishing is important and green energy offers a vibrant future. She has not yet knocked the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) off his perch, but she has shown that she is a dab hand at the Dispatch Box. That said, as she is in the “hostile” gang, and it seems that the hon. Member for Rhondda has been neutered, she will have to put her skates on if she wants to get back into the good books of Captain BirdsEye.

What a week it has been. It has been far from dismal. We have had a turbo-charged Budget, backing businesses of all sizes—the frontline of the economy—and providing work to millions more people. I am sure that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby will welcome the fact that more than 600,000 businesses, more than 70,000 of which are in Yorkshire and the Humber, will no longer pay business rates from 2017. Meanwhile the Labour party is between a rock and a hard place, floundering to get off the hook of the fact that it left office with the largest deficit ever. After six years of progress, my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have navigated through choppy waters with a steady hand on the tiller. We have weathered the storms and,

while there are still storm clouds ahead, our long-term economic plan means that we are ship-shape to reach a safe harbour of economic security, living within our means and working towards tackling the deficit that was at risk of dragging down the country.

The hon. Lady asked several questions, and she can of course use Labour’s Opposition day to debate some of those matters. On the question of personal independence payments and disabilities, I want to stress that we are a one nation Government who want to support everyone to achieve their full potential and live an independent life. In the last 12 months alone, 152,000 more disabled people have moved into work. That represents real lives being transformed as we help people with disabilities and health conditions to move into work and to benefit from all the advantages that that brings.

Dare I say that, even though Labour had the largest peacetime deficit ever, spending on those with disabilities or health conditions will be higher in every year to 2020 than it was in 2010. However, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister told the House on Monday, the Government will not be going ahead with the changes to PIP and we have no plans for further welfare savings over and above those we have already announced. We have legislated to deliver the £12 billion of savings promised in our manifesto, including those made a fortnight ago in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill. We are committed to ensuring that disabled people live their lives free from discrimination, and that is why we have also strengthened the Equality Act 2010 to create a level playing field and to ensure that the law properly protects them.

The hon. Lady referred to the tampon tax, and I want to pay due tribute to the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) in that regard. I will let you into a secret, Mr Speaker. The hon. Member for Dewsbury and I had a bit of a back-and-forth on Twitter, but I am pleased to say that the Government have successfully negotiated—with prompting; I am not denying that—to ensure that we have a zero rate, and I am hoping that that will be introduced in legislation in due course.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby talked about immigration and the refugee children. Everybody is moved by that situation, but I strongly support this Government’s policy of taking the most vulnerable people directly from the camps in the countries surrounding Syria. I think that that is the right approach. She will be aware that, since the decisions were made late last year, the United Kingdom has welcomed more than 1,000 Syrian refugees, and I am pleased that the communities have done their best to ensure that those vulnerable people are made to feel welcome in the United Kingdom.

On energy security, we have just had Energy and Climate Change questions and the hon. Lady referred to EDF and Hinkley Point. Sizewell happens to be in my constituency, and I hope that Sizewell C will follow Hinkley Point C. I assure her that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Energy Ministers continue to have discussions with people at the highest levels of the French Government.

It has been quite a week, Mr Speaker, and many MPs found some pre-recess fun at the British kebab awards last night. I might put in a plug here for the Tiffin cup, which is being promoted by the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). The people who found fun at the awards included the Leader of the Opposition,

who, after being—dare I say it?—skewered at PMQs yesterday, may be looking for some donors, but instead found plenty of donors.

I hope that all hon. Members enjoy the Easter recess. They are welcome to visit the villages and towns of Suffolk Coastal, spending lots of money if they do—I know that some members of the Labour party do that. Members will need to recharge their batteries, because we have a full agenda of legislation when we come back, including the Finance Bill, further cementing this Government's long-term economic plan.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Today is national Wear A Hat Day, about which many MPs have been contacted by their constituents. It highlights brain tumours, which kill more children and adults under the age of 40 than any other cancer, yet only 1% of the national cancer spend goes on brain tumour research. I pay tribute to Philippa Barber from Hamble and her family, who lost her precious husband Nigel in 2013. May we please have a debate on extra funding to support important research into tackling this devastating disease?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is right to raise this important issue, into which the Petitions Committee conducted an inquiry. I am pleased to say that, luckily, there will be such a debate in Westminster Hall on 18 April. I commend my hon. Friend and other colleagues who do so much and perhaps wear stylish hats—not in the Chamber—to support this particular issue.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Given the appalling events in Brussels on Tuesday, will the Government find time in forthcoming business for a debate on how to address the underlying causes of terrorism? If we are to make our communities safer for us all, we need to tackle extremism at its root, not adopt the reactionary, often racist approach advocated by some figures home and abroad.

May we please also have a full debate on the “new” Budget? It would give Ministers a chance to apologise properly to the hundreds of thousands of disabled people who were left in limbo thanks to the Chancellor's callous miscalculations. They have been given ample chance to do so this week, but they have not taken the opportunity.

How about a debate on the importance of unity in political parties? The SNP could lead it and others could learn how to inspire confidence in the electorate. The people of Scotland know that we are a party that puts people, not personal ambition, first, which is why they are backing us in record numbers.

The Equal Pay Act 1970 was enacted three decades ago, but pay inequality remains. We need a full debate to agree a programme and a specific timetable for achieving equality for women. In my time in this Parliament, real progress has been made when women work together, bridging party and political divides, and unite in pursuit of a common cause. I pay tribute to colleagues, including my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), for the repeal of the tampon tax. Let us find more ways for the women of this House to join forces for the benefit of all. Today is an historic day. Here's to the Deputy Leader of the House and the shadow Deputy Leader of the House; may they soon become Leaders.

I was proud to be one of the 1,617,989 people in Scotland who voted yes in Scotland's referendum in 2014. Even though it was not the result for which I had hoped, I respect the decision made by the people of Scotland 18 months ago. Today was the proposed first day of an independent Scotland, so may we have a full debate on how Scotland has fared from being in the Union, including on the risks we face at the hands of this reckless and careless Chancellor and the fact that our vital EU membership is under threat? The majority of people in Scotland now believe that independence would have a positive effect on Scotland's economy. We will certainly not be taking lessons on fiscal competence from a Chancellor who has seen the deficit grow by £555 billion under his watch. They agree with me that Scotland's underlying fiscal position is weakened because we are not independent. We can discuss how Scotland will benefit from another 50 years of oil production and how, when the worldwide price recovers, we should find ways to save the proceeds for future generations, as other countries have. We can address the adverse impact on Scotland's finance of our current commitments to renewing Trident, building at Hinkley Point and constructing a high-speed rail link from London to Manchester. Finally, we can debate why every recent poll shows that as well as placing their trust in the SNP, the people of Scotland are increasingly placing trust in themselves by supporting Scottish independence in record numbers.

Today is the last day of work for Milburn, the Deputy Principal Doorkeeper. May I, as a new Member, thank him for the advice, friendship and help he has given to all new Members, and, indeed, to all Members from across this House? We are truly grateful to him and very much wish him well in his future endeavours. May we also thank all House staff, along with you, Mr Speaker, and all the Deputy Speakers, for the help and support given in this Session? We wish you all a very happy recess.

Dr Coffey: I want to echo the hon. Lady's comments about there being no room for racism in our society, here or anywhere, and we, as political leaders, need to send out that message strongly and repeatedly. On the middle east, we have taken a multi-pronged approach to tackling extremism; our military action, which I appreciate she did not support, goes alongside providing more than £1 billion of aid, making us the second highest donor. We are, thus, showing with our actions how we are trying to help tackle some of the issues at source. On radicalisation, we are undertaking our counter-extremism strategy in a variety of ways, and I know that issue is always under review by the Government.

The hon. Lady refers to the Budget. I am sure she will welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor delivered for Scotland in the Budget exactly what was requested: a freeze in fuel duty; a freeze in whisky duty; and support for the oil and gas industry. I am sure she will also welcome the fact that people are being taken out of paying income tax. That positive action enables people who work hard to keep more of their money in their pocket, and to do as they wish with it. That is certainly a Conservative value, which she probably used to espouse at one point.

The hon. Lady is right to pay tribute to the Equal Pay Act, and she will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is very focused on the issue of gender

[*Dr Thérèse Coffey*]

pay. I have seen the report from the Women and Equalities Committee, and the Government will respond to it in due course. I should remind her that it was the Conservative Government who established that Committee in this Parliament. The gender pay gap is an important issue. It seems largely to have been eliminated for women under the age of 40, and that is to be welcomed, but there is still considerably more to do. I may even send her a copy of my report about the executive pipeline of talent and trying to improve the prospects of women going up the corporate ladder. Other work was undertaken in the review by Jayne-Anne Gadhia and the outcome of that is a charter, which we are encouraging financial firms to sign up to, whereby remuneration via bonuses is linked to progress on this matter—that is a welcome step.

I am surprised that SNP Members are not in black today, because I thought they would be in mourning as it is not Scottish independence day. As the hon. Lady pointed out, fortunately two years ago a clear majority voted to remain in the United Kingdom and are now breathing a collective sigh of relief, as the SNP's fiscal plans would likely now be in turmoil, given the oil price. I expect she wrote her contribution before seeing the independent report today which points out that Scots would have started life today each £2,000 worse off and would be bearing the largest deficit in the developed world. Meanwhile, last night, the Scotland Bill was passed—I think the SNP did welcome that—and we have fulfilled the vow made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister such that the Scottish Parliament that returns in May will be a powerhouse Parliament. As such, I can say that I know other hon. Friends want to christen this “unity day” and long may that continue.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): This morning, the British Horse Society released statistics on accidents involving horses on roads over the past five years revealing that 36 riders have died and 181 horses have been killed. There have also been many other injuries to riders, drivers and horses, and much damage to vehicles on the island and the mainland. The British Horse Society's “Dead Slow” campaign seeks to educate drivers about slowing down to 15 mph, being patient, and allowing at least a car's width when passing horses and driving away slowly. Will the Deputy Leader of the House find time for a debate to promote this important road safety issue?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is right to raise that important issue. I am sure that he agrees that it is perfectly possible to adopt the common-sense approach that a road should be wide enough for walkers, cyclists, horse riders and cars, and that people just need to be reminded of their responsibilities towards more vulnerable road users. For example, the Highway Code advises that motorists pass horse riders and horse-drawn vehicles wide and slowly, giving them as much room as they would if they were overtaking a car. I suggest that this might be an ideal case to take to the Backbench Business Committee, as I am sure that many Members would join a request for such a debate.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Last night, two women were brutally murdered on the Lakes estate in Redcar. A 34-year-old man has been arrested. I am sure

that the whole House will join me in expressing its horror and sadness at these terrible murders and in sending our thoughts and heartfelt condolences to the victims' families, especially the children, and to the local community at this terrible time.

A woman is killed every three days in this country. We have fantastic agencies and support organisations working with women at risk of violence, but they are stretched to breaking point as funding has been cut. Will the Deputy Leader of the House and the Home Secretary work together on the following: first, ensuring that Cleveland police have all the resources they need to pursue justice in this particular case and to support the victims' families; secondly, reviewing the impact of cuts to the police, local agencies, refuges and local authority services on domestic violence rates; and, thirdly, giving the House an update on when the strategy on violence against women and girls will be implemented, and what funding will come with it for local services?

Dr Coffey: The case that the hon. Lady describes is clearly very distressing, and I am sure that the whole House shares her sentiments with regard to the families of the victims. She will be aware that, in the autumn statement, a decision was made not to cut the police budget. None the less, she raises an important point, and we have an opportune moment, dare I say it, with police and crime commissioner elections coming up, to ensure that every candidate puts domestic violence at the heart of their manifestos. I am not aware of what further action the Home Secretary is due to take, but I will bring the hon. Lady's comments to her attention.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): May I take this opportunity to add my support to the calls from the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) for a debate on the United Kingdom? Mr Speaker, I am sure that you will agree that we represent the greatest country on earth—it is a privilege to do so—and in that debate, we could thank the 55% of the people of Scotland who had the good sense to stay with the United Kingdom, and to reject budget cuts and penury. May we celebrate that occasion by having a national public holiday? Let us call it unity day.

Dr Coffey: I feel a campaign for unity day coming on from my hon. Friend. I endorse what he says about the important decision that was taken by the people of Scotland. Now that we have acted on the vow and fulfilled the Smith commission, I really hope that, instead of arguing about process, the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government, who are up for re-election in the next few months, will now be debating the future of Scotland with these enhanced powers.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The case of *Dr Chris Day v. Health Education England* has exposed a serious lacuna in the whistleblowing legislation. If a junior doctor blows the whistle to the HEE, his training can be cut short by the HEE as a punishment, with legal impunity. This situation is not remedied under the new junior doctors contract, but I hope the hon. Lady will agree that it is something that deserves the attention of this House.

Dr Coffey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making me aware of that case. Health Ministers are not due to appear in the House in the next short while, but he

raises an important point about the issue of whistleblowing. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State recently gave a speech about patient safety, which included this idea of a safe space. I am not sure how this case would relate to that but, again, I will ensure that he is made aware of the hon. Gentleman's comments.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May we have a debate on Gypsies, particularly in relation to animal welfare? Despite numerous complaints from me, local residents and other campaigners about the appalling treatment of animals, especially horses, at Esholt Gypsy encampment in my constituency, Bradford council and the RSPCA have refused to take any enforcement action. There is no doubt in my mind that if those animals were the responsibility of anyone else, enforcement action would have been taken, but authorities appear to pussyfoot around and run scared when it comes to Gypsies. May we have a debate on this issue so that we can make it clear in this House that animal welfare should not be sacrificed on the altar of political correctness when it comes to Gypsies?

Dr Coffey: I was under the impression that the legislation successfully steered through the House in the previous Parliament by my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) could have dealt with the issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) raises. It is concerning if councils are not prepared to use that legislation, but I would suggest that we do not need to single out any group of people as regards animal welfare. If there are specific issues, I encourage my hon. Friend to apply for an Adjournment debate to consider this more carefully.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): Before I ask my question, I ask the House to send its sympathies regarding Adrian Ismay, the prison officer from Northern Ireland who died last week as a result of an attack from dissidents, and to say clearly to dissidents that we are never going to let them win, no matter what they do.

As we meet today, the leaders of councils in the north-east of England are discussing whether to sign up to a devolution deal that will give them a paltry £900 million over 30 years to spend between Berwick and Barnard Castle. That is happening on the same day that we have learned that Waterloo station will get £800 million to redevelop within three years. May we have a debate in Government time about the inequality and unfairness of how resources in this country are shared out?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of the prison officer, and I believe that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition appropriately paid tribute yesterday.

Devolution is an opportunity for different parts of the country to grab the powers, not just the cash, that can make a real difference to local communities. I am not aware of the situation with the devolution deal that the hon. Gentleman describes, but I assure him that the Government have continued to invest around the country, not just in London. I am sure that he will welcome the announcements that have been made about enhancing the A1 and all the contributions made by the Government, alongside the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson), to bring Hitachi to the region.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): One sixth of all accidental deaths of children under the age of four are drowning-related, nearly twice the number for children of the same age who die as a result of fire. May we have a debate to commend the efforts of the Royal Life Saving Society UK and its work to prevent drowning, and also to ask the Government how they can support quality water safety education being delivered in all schools throughout the United Kingdom?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is vice-chair of the all-party group on water safety and drowning prevention, and I commend him for his work. Swimming and water safety are part of the national curriculum for physical education at a primary level and the Government's sport strategy, which was published in December, included a commitment to establish a working group to advise on how to ensure that no child leaves school unable to meet a minimum standard of capability and competence in swimming. I expect the working group to be established in the near future and to report by the end of this year.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Macur review into historical child abuse in Wales was published last week. Survivors are angered that the unredacted version has so far been seen only by Government Ministers and senior establishment lawyers, and the Children's Commissioner for Wales believes that more transparency should be afforded to survivors. Macur was discussed in an hour-long Westminster Hall debate on Tuesday, but Members strongly expressed the need for a full debate in Government time. Could this be arranged?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady heard from the Minister yesterday the view of the Department on that matter. I also point out that the Secretary of State will be before the House answering Wales questions on the Wednesday we get back, when I suggest that she takes that opportunity to press this matter further.

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): The Committees on Arms Export Controls have recently been reinstated and yesterday saw the first evidence session on the Yemen inquiry. May we have a debate on the importance of scrutiny of arms exports and the role of the Committees in that scrutiny?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is being modest, because he was elected Chairman of those Committees last month. I noted that the inquiry had been launched and that the deadline for written submissions was tomorrow. The issue is important, and I think people across the House want to ensure that arms export controls are undertaken diligently. When the report is completed, my hon. Friend may wish to seek from the Liaison Committee or the Backbench Business Committee appropriate time in which to debate it.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): This week I have been contacted by the parent of a nine-year-old child who has Asperger's syndrome and is threatening to commit suicide daily. The parent has been unable to access child and adolescent mental health services, largely due to underfunding and long waiting lists. May we have an urgent debate in Government time to discuss the ongoing crisis in mental health provision, particularly for our children and young people?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady raises an important case on behalf of her constituent and I am sorry to hear about those issues. The Government have put an extra £450 million specifically into children's mental health, so I am concerned if that is not reaching the frontline. I will, of course, raise this with the Health Secretary on her behalf.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): A high school in my constituency had an inspirational visit by a holocaust survivor in the past week, but this comes at a time when a West Yorkshire Labour councillor has been suspended for anti-Semitic comments on social media. May we have a debate on how we can all unite in this House in driving out the evil of anti-Semitism, which seems to be creeping back into our politics at the moment?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. There is no room for racism or anti-Semitism at all, and it is important that people in public and private life stamp this out whenever they encounter it. He is right to call for a debate and I think it would be a popular topic for the Backbench Business Committee.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): This week, on the 10-year anniversary of smoke-free legislation in Scotland, the World Health Organisation has commended the people of Scotland and the leadership shown by Members of the Scottish Parliament. Would the Deputy Leader of the House agree that we should commend this leadership and the bold vision of the Scottish Parliament, and may we have a statement on the importance of this work, and of doing everything that we can to stamp out smoking?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady will recognise that it is, of course, for Scottish Ministers to reply to the Scottish Parliament. However, I notice that, after raising the issue of medals, she was successful in procuring a debate, which will take place next week. I suggest that she applies for a debate because then we could have a full response from our Public Health Minister on the importance of trying to reduce smoking in our population.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In the light of the sad closure of the print edition of *The Independent*, may we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on a future policy for the preservation of photographic archives? I know that the National Archives has done a great deal of work on preserving Government documentation in the digital age, but when a great newspaper closes, it would be a terrible shame to lose for the nation the photographic record that it has built up, and in the digital age, this raises serious practical problems for the long term.

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend raises an interesting point. My expectation is that ownership of the photographs lies either with the proprietors of that newspaper or the original photographers, so I am not sure that it is for Government to try and automatically ensure that what my right hon. Friend suggests happens. However, it might be possible to facilitate that discussion with our national museums. The Secretary of State will be back at the Dispatch Box a fortnight after we get back, and I recommend that my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) asks the question then.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): The leader of the Conservatives in the Welsh Assembly, Mr Andrew R.T. Davies, receives £97,000 a year in farming subsidy. When can we debate the campaign launched yesterday under the heading "Farmers will be better off" with Brexit, so that Members of this House can tell us how much they receive in their own farming subsidies, and how much more they expect from the taxpayer after Brexit?

Dr Coffey: I am not aware of the rules of the House on the declaration of receipts of farming payments, but clearly the hon. Gentleman has been able to find that information because it is on the public record. It is really important, I think, for the United Kingdom to stay in the European Union. The common agricultural policy is not perfect; far from it, but it has led to—how can I put it?—certainty of income for certain farmers.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): May I congratulate my fellow north-east Lincolnshire Member, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), on her role on the Front Bench? I thank her for sparing us the jokes of the shadow Leader of the House.

My Cleethorpes constituency is located in the Yorkshire and Humber region. A recent joint report from Transport for the North and the Department for Transport completely ignores northern Lincolnshire, even obliterating it from the rail network map. In view of the greater Lincolnshire devolution deal, may we have a statement on the possibility of realigning the regions so that the whole of Lincolnshire is looked at together as part of the east midlands?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. I am not sure if he wants to be included in the transport strategy for the northern powerhouse or to move to the midlands—it sounds like the latter. Surely what would be of benefit in improving transport in the north, specifically going across to Hull, would also benefit Cleethorpes and, indeed, Great Grimsby, including the magnificent Humber bridge, whose tolls were halved four years ago.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): May we have an urgent statement on the effect on employee share ownership schemes of HMRC's abandonment of its valuation checks service because of Government cuts?

Dr Coffey: I am not aware of this matter. If the hon. Gentleman writes to a Treasury Minister, he may get an answer more quickly, although Treasury Ministers will be in the Chamber on 19 April.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): For those of us who believe that our four nations are greater together than the sum of their parts, today could have been the sad day of separation. May I therefore join the calls from the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) and the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) for a debate on the merits of the Union and on how all four countries are stronger within that Union than they would be apart?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend may be joining the campaign alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies). We spent quite a lot of time debating such

matters during the passage of the Scotland Bill. If my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) were to apply to the Backbench Business Committee for a debate, I am sure he would look upon his own recommendation favourably.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The Palace of Westminster is hosting a large additional workforce over the next few years. With reference to standards of behaviour towards young female members of staff, may we have confirmation that name-calling and off-tune whistling—that is the best way I can describe it—remains inappropriate on the Estate, no matter from whom?

Dr Coffey: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady is referring to the restoration and renewal of this place and therefore the presence of a larger construction workforce. I expect that when the Commission—or whichever authority we create to undertake those repairs—proceeds to the next stage, standards of behaviour will be included in the contracts.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): This week sees the Jewish festival of Purim, which commemorates the deliverance of the Jewish people from Haman, the vizier of the Persian king. We have also seen the festival of Naw-Ruz and, of course, we celebrate Easter shortly. Today we celebrate the second day of Holi, which commemorates the festival of colours and the deliverance of great Hindu gods. These all have one great element in common: they are festivals of renewal, celebrating spring. May we have a debate celebrating the wonderful renewal of the country under this Conservative Government to ensure that we deliver for everyone as one nation?

Dr Coffey: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work he does for the diverse communities that he serves in his constituency. I understand that he is known affectionately as “Bob bai” by many of his Hindu constituents. He is right to stress the importance of celebrating the many festivals that make up the rich tapestry of our country. I am certainly looking forward to Easter Sunday so that I can break my chocolate fast and have a delicious Easter egg.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I welcome the announcement in the Budget of the sugar tax, and also the fact that the money raised will be spent on school sports. May we have a debate in Government time on the reinstatement of the school sports partnership, an extremely successful scheme that was scrapped by the coalition Government?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: The hon. Lady is right to point out the importance of school sports. Part of the sports strategy published by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is about encouraging everybody to be active. I agree with her that getting children to be active at a young age and keeping that activity going matters. I am sure the Backbench Business Committee would look favourably on such a popular subject.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): May I echo the calls of my hon. Friends the Members for Fylde (Mark Menzies) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for a serious debate on respecting and thanking the 55% of the Scottish electorate—on a high turnout—who

thoroughly rejected separatism? Mr Speaker, that is a serious matter: had the SNP won the argument, your position would have disappeared today, and you would no longer be the Speaker of the British Parliament—there would not be a British Parliament. May I therefore ask the Deputy Leader of the House to give serious consideration to holding a debate about having a national British holiday to celebrate unity day and to thank the Scottish people who said “No thanks” to the SNP?

Dr Coffey: The campaign is gathering momentum as my hon. Friend joins my hon. Friends the Members for Fylde and for Torbay. Most people in the House welcomed the result in 2014 and are glad that Scotland is still part of the United Kingdom, and that is something we can cherish. As to whether we need a special holiday, I look forward to the results of my hon. Friend’s campaign.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): If my memory serves me right, Select Committees were an innovation from a previous Conservative Leader of the House—Norman St John-Stevas. Does the Deputy Leader of the House agree that that was a brilliant innovation? Is it not time that we had a debate on how we further empower the Select Committee system? Anyone who wants to be convinced of the power of Select Committees need only listen to a recording of yesterday’s Treasury Committee session with the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson)—if there was ever a Select Committee where a witness was fileted, that was it. May we have an early debate on this issue, including on important questions such as whether we have the right to make people come here? The head of Kraft refused to come in the past, and we now have another person refusing to come.

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman, of course, was the Chairman of a Select Committee, and he will recognise the value of Select Committees. It was the Conservative Government led by Margaret Thatcher who introduced them, and that really strengthened the House. When I served on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, we were able to make sure that the Murdoch family attended, even after an initial expectation that they would not. There are therefore procedures in place, and as the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) showed in the House the other day, there are channels open with the Speaker to progress such matters.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): As we are on the eve of the Easter holiday, may I say that North Devon would be a fantastic place to visit over this long weekend? There is a long list of fantastic attractions. May we debate the importance of the tourism industry to the economy of North Devon and the wider south-west?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend takes me back to my childhood, when I enjoyed holidays in Combe Martin. I never made it to Westward Ho!—the only town in the country with an exclamation mark officially in its name—but I recognise that the Royal North Devon is the oldest golf course in the country. I should, however, flag up that I visited Salcombe, in south Devon, last year. One of the wonderful things about being part of the United Kingdom is that there are so many gorgeous places around the country—including Suffolk Coastal—where we can truly enjoy a restful break.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, may I first express my thanks to outgoing MSP Tricia Marwick for 17 years' service as an MSP and four years' exceptional service as Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament?

On 2 December, the Prime Minister promised to come back to the House within three months to give us an update on the war in Syria. He expressed an expectation that, within six months, we would have a transnational Government in Syria. He also pleaded with us to support military action because of what he described as an urgent need for ultra-precision bombing against specific Daesh-occupied buildings in Raqqa. By the time we return from the recess, we will be more than a month past the deadline set by the Prime Minister, and we will be only seven weeks from his target for the transnational Government. Furthermore, according to the MOD website, precisely one missile has been fired at a Daesh-occupied command-and-control building in Raqqa.

Dr Coffey: A recent urgent question provided the opportunity to ask a Cabinet Minister about that matter. My understanding is that we will return to quarterly updates and I anticipate a statement in May, but the hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Prime Minister is here every week and he can ask him a question then.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I have called several times for a debate on gangs and serious youth violence. We managed to secure one through the Backbench Business Committee and the House agreed and voted on the need to set up a cross-party commission to look into the root causes of serious youth violence. What are the Government going to do about implementing it?

Mr Speaker: Or about facilitating a debate thereon.

Dr Coffey: I did not follow the hon. Lady's debate, but I am aware of the seriousness of the issue, and she will be aware of previous legislation we have introduced to enhance criminal penalties. It is, of course, open to her and Members from across the House to progress that commission and present its findings to the Government. I may well commend to her doing that and seeking another Back-Bench business debate once the commission reports.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): With a new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, do the Government intend to hold a debate in Government time or make a statement on DWP sanctions guidance, so that Members can discuss issues such as failing to attend or take part in a work-focused interview without good reason? If so, will the Deputy Leader of the House also answer the question that has been asked by many members of the public: is the Chancellor going to be sanctioned for his absence on Monday afternoon?

Dr Coffey: I am very pleased that my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) is the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Of course, he has only just been appointed, so I am not aware of whether he plans to change the things to which the hon. Gentleman refers. He has expressed the view that he wants to ensure that the Department implements properly the welfare reforms for which we have legislated, and I am sure he will have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said today.

Points of Order

12.1 pm

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Every Member is grateful for the messages we have received this week about House of Commons security, in the light of the tragedies across Europe, but could you inform us on how Back Benchers can feed back any concerns? Is there a formal process or could we invent one?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising such an important matter on the Floor of the House. I am sure he is right in saying that all Members of this House will be grateful for the new advice and procedures, which are for the protection not only of Members, but of the many people who work for them, both in this House and in our constituency offices. There are various ways in which the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members can feed back or discuss further measures or advice that might be necessary, one of which is via the Serjeant at Arms. I am also aware that the Chairman of Ways and Means has spoken in person to many Members of the House in his capacity as chairman of various committees that deal with the matter. The hon. Gentleman has very cleverly raised the matter on the Floor of the House; it is, therefore, a matter of record and I am glad that he has done so.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Following this morning's application by the Opposition Chief Whip for by-elections in Ogmere and Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough, a Government Member shouted out, "Any more?" The comment was hugely disrespectful to our late friend and colleague, Harry Harpham, and to his family. I seek your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, as to how the situation may be addressed.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am quite taken aback by what the hon. Lady has said. I was not in the Chamber at that point, so I have no personal knowledge of it, but if, indeed, any Member of this House made a remark like that at a time when the writ was being moved after the death of a Member of this House, they simply should not have done so. If no one else has told them that they should not have done so, I am telling them now, and I hope that that will be taken note of. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising such a sensitive matter.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Could you advise me on how I can put on the record my concern that there has been absolute silence from separatist activists about the fact that today was meant to be independence day for them? There has been no reference to that whatsoever, in terms of respecting the Scottish electorate.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is making. I was not in the Chair over the last hour, but I am aware that while Mr Speaker was in the Chair, various hon. Members made some very interesting suggestions about how today could be celebrated in future.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have a feeling that the hon. Gentleman's point is about to be answered by a further point of order.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am not quite sure where the hon. Gentleman was during business questions, when I specifically made reference to that. Perhaps it speaks to the fact that Members of this House, particularly Conservative Members and particularly those of the male sort, do not listen when women are speaking. How about starting from today?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I wish I could correct the hon. Lady, but her observation that it is often the case that the male kind of person does not listen when the female is speaking is, indeed, correct. With persistence, we will overcome that. I assure the hon. Lady that the Chair has heard what she has said, and I assure the hon. Gentleman that the matter that he has raised has been properly listened to in this House.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I, within the rules of order, express the hope that 23 June will go down as independence day for the United Kingdom as a whole?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman knows that that is not a matter for the Chair, and that I would not dream of encouraging him to express, or of forbidding him from expressing, that hope over and over again.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I raised a point of order on 9 February about the Government's attitude to the Trade Union Bill and Lords amendments. That point of order got much publicity, because it led to a discussion of the Speaker's reading habits in relation to the *Socialist Worker*. The Speaker on 9 February advised me to submit a written question to try to get clarity on the matter, and written question 26990 is the named day question that I submitted on 11 February. I have not had a response. Can you advise me, Madam Deputy Speaker, how I can get an answer, on behalf of 6 million workers who are trade union members, as to the Government's attitude to the Trade Union Bill and Lords amendments?

Madam Deputy Speaker: As the hon. Gentleman is well aware, and as I am sure Mr Speaker has made clear, Mr Speaker will have given the hon. Gentleman that advice about tabling a written question because the answers to questions are not a matter for the Chair. However, the fact that a question has been submitted and, several weeks later, has not been answered is a matter that Mr Speaker would most certainly deprecate. I am quite sure that those on the Treasury Bench have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said, and that the message will go to the appropriate Department that the hon. Gentleman should have received an answer. Whether it is the answer that he would like to receive is another matter, and not one that I can address, but he ought to

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

receive an answer. I am quite sure that if he does not receive such an answer in the near future, he will be perfectly justified in raising the matter again on the Floor of the House.

Backbench Business

Court Closures

12.9 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House acknowledges the need for some underused courts and tribunals to close; notes the detrimental effect that too many court closures will have on access to justice for vulnerable families and individuals particularly in rural areas where public transport is less reliable; further notes with concern the effect these closures will have on the experienced and dedicated staff working in the 86 courts and tribunals; and calls on the Government to acknowledge the concerns of staff, magistrates and third sector organisations who highlighted numerous flaws in the consultation document, to think again on some of these closures and acknowledge the importance of access to local justice.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this debate. I requested such a debate, with the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and other Members from across the House, for a number of reasons: first, because of the scale of the court closure programme, with 86 courts and tribunals closing, compounded by the closures during the last Parliament, when 146 courts closed; secondly, because of the level of concern expressed by colleagues across the House about the implications of the closure programme for access to justice, and a number of flaws within the consultation process that provided the basis for the closure programme; and thirdly, because the closures were announced in a written ministerial statement on the last sitting day before the February recess. I feel strongly that both the scale of the closure programme and its implications mean that the announcement should have been made in the House, and that colleagues should have had the opportunity to raise issues on behalf of their constituents, and ask questions about the planned closures and their impact at the time that the announcement was made. I am pleased that we will have the opportunity to do so today.

Courts have a very wide range of different users. If we consider the hierarchy of Crown courts, county courts, magistrates courts, youth courts, family courts and tribunals, we can see that the people who need to access the courts include jurors, magistrates, victims and witnesses, families in the process of breaking up, a range of public sector staff—those working directly at the courts, but also those bringing cases and acting as witnesses—members of the judiciary, and individuals facing trial. It is easy to think of those accessing our courts primarily as suspected criminals, but our courts are in reality a vital public service, reaching a very wide range of people in their scope, and it is important that we remember that as we debate the closure programme.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): If civic areas are to lose their courts as a result of this decision, does the hon. Lady agree that proper provision needs to be made, not least for video conferencing for people giving evidence? For example, local newspapers should be able to send a journalist on a particular day so that its readers cannot only be told where crimes take place, but hear about convictions, because justice must be seen to be done as much as actually done.

Helen Hayes: I will come on to talk about the role of new technology and other forms of provision in addressing some of the issues presented by the closure programme.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Although the court in my constituency will not close, it will take on the burden of the work of courts that are closing. On the Government's own assessment, people will have to travel for over an hour to reach Willesden magistrates court. I think that is a barrier to justice.

Helen Hayes: My hon. Friend makes valid points about both the additional burden on courts that will have to absorb the workload of courts that are closing, and the very important issue of travel times, particularly for many vulnerable constituents. I will come on to talk about those things.

I do not have a court or tribunal in my constituency of Dulwich and West Norwood, but my constituents will be very much affected by the planned closure of Lambeth county court. Almost half the postcode areas covered by Lambeth county court fall within my constituency. I am grateful to the Minister for taking the time to meet me during the consultation process, and subsequently for taking part in a Westminster Hall debate about Lambeth county court, but despite that engagement, my concerns remain. In justifying the closures, the Minister refers a great deal to the modernisation of the justice system and the use of new technology, but there is great concern that the closure plans appear to put the cart before the horse—closing courts and tribunals without a clear plan for replacing the capacity that will be lost with new technology.

The Government should have brought to the House a comprehensive strategy for modernising our courts and tribunals to make them fit for the 21st century. We need a plan that sets out clearly what new technology can deliver for our justice system, the investment that must be made to deliver it and the savings that can be made in physical infrastructure as a consequence of the introduction of technology. But there is no such plan. What the Government have announced is a very significant closure programme with a promise that, after courts and tribunals have closed, pilots will take place and investment will be made to introduce new technology. This is a very risky way to treat our justice system.

Access to justice is a vital principle in the UK's unwritten constitution. It was argued by Lord Bingham of Cornhill, when he was the senior Lord of Appeal in Ordinary, that access to justice is one of the eight sub-rules that make up the rule of law. He said:

“My fifth sub-rule is that means must be provided for resolving, without prohibitive cost or inordinate delay, bona fide civil disputes which the parties themselves are unable to resolve...What it does is to recognise the right of unimpeded access to a court as a basic right, protected by our own domestic law, and in my view comprised within the principle of the rule of law.”

He went on to explain that the common law right of access to justice is composed of three rights, one of which is the right of access to a court. Lord Justice Laws has said:

“Access to the courts is a constitutional right”.

In relation to the planned courts and tribunals closure programme, the Government argued that

“effective access to justice does not...necessarily mean providing physical access to a building or require us to have a purpose-built court or tribunal in every local area.”

My contention is that this statement can only possibly be valid if the Government demonstrate that access is provided in a fail-safe way by other means, and that they simply cannot do that without setting out a clear strategy for how it will be delivered.

The Minister has spoken about various things, some of which are indeed already happening in some locations, that may be possible—video links for witnesses to provide evidence, facilities for filing court papers online, making a plea by mobile phone—but there is no national standard and no plan for delivery. No assessment has been made of which court and tribunal services and facilities should be available to everyone in every area, which of these can reasonably be provided digitally and which should be provided in dedicated facilities. Although I do not think there is much disagreement about the kinds of things that might be done, it is impossible to make an assessment of the extent to which access to justice will be provided at an appropriate level with the help of digital technology until the Government lay out a comprehensive plan.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): In addition to the plan for which my hon. Friend is calling, we also need a plan to extend mobile coverage to many areas. We just do not have that coverage in some of the rural areas where closures are planned.

Helen Hayes: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. It reinforces my argument that without a plan—a proven and tested plan—the Government simply cannot rely on advances in technology to substitute for the closure of physical facilities.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Does she agree that the whole point of a system of magistrates courts is that local people make decisions about local crimes? Fundamentally, without a proper plan, magistrates may be drawn from areas surrounding the surviving courts, while many communities will provide no magistrates whatsoever.

Helen Hayes: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about the long tradition in this country involving the justice system and the locality it serves.

I will turn to some of the specific concerns that have been raised about the consequences of the closures. The first is the straightforward issue of physical access to a court building for those who need to attend court either for a court hearing or to instigate an administrative procedure, such as applying in person for a stay of eviction. The Government response to the consultation says:

“It will still be the case that...97% of citizens will be able to reach their required court within an hour by car.”

This statement is simply not true. The data on which the Government response is based relate to the travel time between court buildings, not the travel time from residents' homes to what will now be their closest court. On the basis of these data, residents who currently live within an hour of an existing court may now have to travel a further hour beyond that court to access their nearest

[*Helen Hayes*]

court. It is time for the Government to undertake and publish an analysis of the physical accessibility of courts in terms of the journey times faced by residents on a postcode basis, not from court to court, so that the impact of the closures plan can be properly understood and scrutinised.

The second problem with the travel time data is that they rely too much on the private car as a mode of transport. Only half of households on low incomes own a car. Many of my constituents who have to attend court in relation to issues such as housing evictions are on low incomes, and the same is true across the country. The response to the consultation does not consider in any detail the accessibility of courts and tribunals by public transport, or accessibility by bus, which is often the only mode of transport that residents on lower incomes can afford, even where faster routes are available. I have looked at the travel times that residents from parts of my constituency—for example, a victim of domestic violence—will experience after Lambeth county court closes and they have to travel to Wandsworth, where some of the services will be provided. Many of those residents will face a journey of at least an hour each way by bus, and in the worst-case scenario, a four-hour round trip. That is in London, which has the best public transport network of any city in the UK. Colleagues who represent rural constituencies tell me that in some cases the journey times that their constituents will face are such that it will not be possible to travel to court and back in a single day, further adding to the costs of accessing justice.

Richard Benyon: The hon. Lady makes a powerful point that will resonate with people in a lot of villages in my constituency. The Library document states that just 15% of people in my constituency will be able to reach court by public transport in one hour, and that is of great concern for those who have the trauma of having to give evidence after a crime has been committed against them.

Helen Hayes: The hon. Gentleman's powerful point illustrates my argument.

The Law Society has raised serious concerns about the effects that longer, more expensive journey times will have on the justice system for jurors. They will be more likely to find justifiable reasons to postpone their jury service, and Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service will have to pay additional costs to compensate them for additional travel costs. The changes will also affect witnesses, many of whom already require a good deal of persuasion and support to attend court, and vulnerable residents who are being taken to court in circumstances where life is already stressful. Such people might find it extremely difficult to make it to court and, as a consequence, to have a fair hearing, because they are not there in person to explain their circumstances.

Dawn Butler: As a magistrate, I can attest to witnesses, sufferers of domestic violence or people with chaotic lifestyles who are completely put off by the extra travel needed to access justice.

Helen Hayes: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point.

Resolution, which represents 6,500 family lawyers and other professionals who are committed to a non-adversarial approach to family law and the resolution of family disputes, says that the court closures will have a huge impact on the ability of families to access the justice system, and it emphasises that those who will be most affected are vulnerable people such as victims of domestic abuse. Requiring a victim of domestic abuse to travel further on public transport in order to apply for an injunction will increase risk and act as a further disincentive for people seeking protection, on top of the issues already presented by the lack of access to legal aid.

Let me highlight three examples from my constituency caseload that illustrate the vulnerability of many people who have to access the court system. The first is a man who came to this country as an asylum seeker having been a child soldier in Nigeria. He is doing his utmost to find work, and currently has a zero-hours contract. Sometimes his employer has work for him, and sometimes it does not. That is not within his control, but as a consequence he has a fluctuating income, which means that intermittently he has to apply for jobseeker's allowance and housing benefit. Delays in processing his JSA claim sometimes mean that his housing benefit is frozen. That causes rent arrears, and at times he has been served with a notice seeking possession. None of that is his fault. He is a man with a traumatic past who is doing everything that he can to make the best of life, in a country that he had never imagined finding himself in. In my view, we should not be asking him to bear the additional expense and stress of having to travel long distances to access a court and engage in a difficult process that is not of his making.

Another constituent is recently widowed. Her husband was a social housing tenant, and for her to succeed to the tenancy, she needed to provide proof of his death. However, an administrative error with the death certificate caused a delay and meant that her landlord commenced eviction proceedings. She lives in the farthest flung part of my constituency in terms of access to a court. Is it right for her to face a four-hour round trip by bus to explain why the registrar made a mistake in recording her husband's death?

The third case highlights some of the wider problems with a justice system that is already very stretched. This constituent is in his 80s. He suffered antisocial behaviour from his upstairs neighbour for many years, causing him and his wife great distress, and sometimes leading to him sleeping in his car to escape the noise. His council landlord did everything possible to gather evidence and commence eviction proceedings against the neighbour, but it took months for the case to come to court. When it did, the police failed to turn up to give evidence, and the case had to be adjourned. That situation would have been compounded even further by a longer journey time, or by moving proceedings to a court that did not have the capacity to absorb additional work.

Very often the circumstances that lead to someone attending court involve personal sadness, and many people who attend court are vulnerable. Fulfilling the obligation to make our justice system accessible must involve thinking about the considerable challenges that our most vulnerable residents face, and designing a system around those challenges, not around residents who have the most capacity.

The closure programme has the potential for significant hidden costs for the wider public sector, and those were not considered or scrutinised during the consultation process or in the Government's response to it. The Law Society has highlighted the additional costs associated with prison and probation staff having to transport defendants for longer distances. Additional transportation costs may be incurred by the police, as increased numbers of people choose not to attend court and subsequently end up being transported there by the police. There will be increased costs for councils, as social workers and housing officers are forced to travel longer distances and spend more time away from their day-to-day duties to provide evidence in court.

There are already frustrations within the justice system. Many lawyers I have spoken to who work in London decry the experience of using the Central London county court since it moved to share premises with the Royal Courts of Justice. They describe a court that is so completely overwhelmed with the volume of work that it is beginning to resemble the chancery court in Dickens's "Bleak House", such is the lack of confidence that effective judgments will emerge from it. The Law Society and others have raised concerns about the impact of the closure programme on court staff, in a context where there are already frustrations about administrative problems and delays within the system. Such problems would be exacerbated if busy courts are closed and their workload transferred to other courts that are already operating at high capacity.

Many magistrates regard their work as a very local form of public service. There is a strong connection between the community they know and their role in ensuring justice for that community. There are serious concerns that having far fewer courts and requiring magistrates to travel long distances in order to serve will break this country's strong tradition of a justice system that is rooted in the individual spatial communities it serves.

Concerns have also been raised with me about the sustainability of many duty solicitor schemes, which have already been stretched to the limit by cuts in legal aid and changes to the contract. Solicitors in my local area have said that many of them would be forced to give up duty solicitor work if they had to travel further to attend court, such is the marginal viability of the scheme already.

Finally, let me turn to the detail of the closure proposals and highlight just a few ways in which I believe the programme to be flawed. The proposed closure of Birmingham youth court would have a significant impact on young defendants, who would have to appear in an adult court, in breach of the Government's statutory and international obligations. How was that proposal ever brought forward, and why were those issues not anticipated and addressed?

The proposal to close a brand-new, fit-for-purpose court in Rotherham, which contains a magistrates court, county court and family court, at a time, and in a town, in which child protection issues are at the forefront of everybody's mind, is difficult to comprehend. In Bicester, the proposed closure of the court in a rural area with poor public transport services at a time when the local population is about to expand significantly, due to the Government's designation of Bicester as a "garden town", is simply short-termist.

In my local area, the closure of Lambeth county court remains deeply problematic. It is leased to Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service, with nine years left to run on the lease, and as such, there is no large capital sum to be derived from the sale of the site. The lawyers I have spoken to who use Lambeth county court say that it functions extremely well as a specialist housing court.

I appreciate that, as a consequence of the representations that I and others made during the consultation process, housing possession hearings will not now move six miles away to Wandsworth but to Camberwell, which is much closer. That is welcome news, but there remain concerns about the victims of domestic violence who will still have to travel to Wandsworth, and about how the move to Camberwell will actually work in practice. There is time, within the current lease, to make a proper plan for Lambeth: to work out the role new technology can play in making our justice system more accessible; to work out the physical space necessary to accommodate an efficient court; and to plan properly for the transition. There is no evidence in the closure programme that any detailed feasibility work has been undertaken to explore lower-cost ways of accommodating court services locally—for example, in other public buildings or community centres. Although such options are mentioned, they really should have been explored in detail before the closure programme was finalised.

The accessibility of our justice system and the way it treats our most vulnerable residents is a mark of our civilisation. Too many people across the country have raised concerns that the Government's proposed closures will have an unacceptable impact on vulnerable people, present additional costs for other parts of the public sector which have not been properly accounted for, and make our justice system less accessible.

I fully accept that new technology may have a role to play in creating a justice system that is fit for purpose for the 21st century, as well as saving costs, but we have no plan from the Government as to how that will be achieved. I urge the Government to rethink their approach. I urge them to come back to the House with a plan that addresses the concerns that have been raised and that balances savings to be made from the physical court estate with investment in technology to mitigate the impact of these changes.

12.31 pm

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): The impact on my constituency of the proposals to close courts across the country has been to identify the court in Buxton for closure. This is probably the third or fourth time I have spoken on this matter, in the Chamber and in Westminster Hall, since that decision. I heard what the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) said about timings, but I pay tribute to the Minister. He has been exemplary in his availability, transparency and consideration for individual Members. He met the hon. Lady and he met me on several occasions. There was a Westminster Hall debate, principally on the courthouse in Buxton. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) secured a similar debate, so we have all had a fair run at this.

I was strongly opposed to the closure of Buxton court. The alternative was to send everybody to Chesterfield, just because it happened to be in Derbyshire. For those

[*Andrew Bingham*]

Members who are not aware of the geography of Derbyshire and the High Peak, the clue is very much in the name of my constituency. Getting from Buxton to Chesterfield is not easy. Only a couple of weeks ago, the constituency had about six or seven inches of snow in a single day. It would have been practically impossible for people to get to Chesterfield—I got stuck in Bamford, which is not even as far as Chesterfield. I was very concerned about the proposals. I thought they were wrong and I said so at the time.

I will recount some of the details of the decision on Buxton, because it is important to consider this issue in context. The consultation document relating specifically to Buxton is, as I have said before, the worst consultation document I have seen in many a year, both as a Member of Parliament and as a member of my local council. It was riddled with errors, falsehoods and mistakes. There was much discussion about the document and, because I thought it was so woeful, I probably used some phraseology that Members probably ought not to use. After much discussion, Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service admitted it had made some mistakes in the document, but it still pursued the same end-game and the decision has been made to close Buxton courthouse. I regret that decision, but it has been made and I do not think we can revisit it here today.

At the time, in discussions with the Minister and others on the Chesterfield issue, I looked for a compromise, politics being very much the art of compromise. I cannot welcome the decision to close Buxton court because I think it is wrong, but I will, reluctantly, accept it. The Minister listened to the points I made about the difficulties of commuting to Chesterfield. The decision was taken to keep the Stockport court open. The hon. Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey) is not here, but, come 2020, she may well say that she saved Stockport court. She might even flag up my contribution to saving it. Although Stockport is in a different county, it is a lot easier to get to Stockport from High Peak, as it is to get there from Macclesfield, which faces a similar challenge.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): It is very interesting to hear the hon. Gentleman's tale. I accept what he says about the Minister, but my logical proposals for Durham, which would make travel a lot easier for my constituents, were completely dismissed and ignored. I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman has more power over the Minister than Opposition Members have.

Andrew Bingham: I am not sure how to respond to that without sounding big-headed. I do not know the ins and outs of the courts in Durham, but I felt I put forward a coherent argument.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Shailesh Vara): My hon. Friend is making a very passionate speech. I just want to put on the record that decisions on changes, closures and keeping courts open have been made about courts represented by Members on all sides of the House. There has been no preferential treatment for Conservative Members. The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) sits on the Labour Benches. I listened to her eagerly, as she

said, and the proposals were changed. My hon. Friend will also be aware that the Stockport constituency is held by a Labour Member.

Andrew Bingham: I argued against the closure of the Buxton court. It will be closed, so I was only partially successful.

The response to the consultation states:

“move the workload to Chesterfield justice centre and Stockport magistrates and county courts”.

My concern, which I want to flag up today, is how much work will be going to where. I do not want only the odd case going to Stockport just to placate one awkward Member of Parliament.

I want to raise the response to the proposals and the consultation. My judgment is coloured by my views about the way the consultation was carried out and by its content. Yet again, I think there is a hidden agenda and that the officials are letting the Minister down. The response document, which I have here, contains serious flaws. For example, nowhere in the response are the comments made by High Peak Borough Council. The council has 43 elected members from across the political spectrum and they discussed this issue. They made representations, but they have not been referred to anywhere in the official response to the consultation. It seems as though the officials did not like what the council said, so they did not put it in. They have either ignored it or treated it with disdain. This happens at a time when, across the political parties, we are seeking people to stand for public office in councils. Councillors go to meetings, make their opinions well known and then they are ignored. If we are not careful, this will increase the feeling of “What's the point?” I am very, very disappointed by that. I may be a little cynical, but were councillors' representations not mentioned because they did not fit in with what Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service wanted?

The decision has been made and it will be implemented. In the official documents, Buxton court is earmarked to close in the first tranche. It is therefore scheduled to take place as we speak today, between February and June this year. The argument was made that the court could not be moved to Stockport because it is in Cheshire and Buxton is in Derbyshire. After discussions, the Minister said the system could work across counties, which I can accept. However, I am told that for the work of a Derbyshire court to be sent out of county, further administrative action needs to take place. I urge the Minister to ensure that that action is taken. I do not stand here as member of the Minister's fan club, but he is a decent chap and he has been very fair with me.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): This is about public money.

Andrew Bingham: I am talking about public money. This whole debate is about public money. That is why I said we should keep Buxton open.

I am concerned that the Minister has been let down by his officials, because the consultation was flawed, or wrong, and the officials showed an arrogance and unwillingness to accept the mistakes they had made in the consultation. Now that we see that the response

document is highly selective, I fear they are letting him down again. I doubt their motivation. The Courts Service has been given a decision it does not want, and now, from where I am sitting—I might be cynical, bordering on paranoid—it seems to be very tardy in implementing his decision. So long as the delay continues, given that the courts are due to close imminently, the work will have to go to Chesterfield, which is what the service wanted. That was their original intention, and the longer the delay continues, the harder it will be to implement his decision to send the work to Stockport. That is what I am concerned about.

Thanks to the Minister's determination, contrary to what has been said by the Opposition, and thanks to his willingness to listen to hon. Members, including to me on this occasion, the decision to move work to Stockport was taken, and I applaud him for that. As I have said, we want it sent to Stockport; we do not want everything sent to Chesterfield. That is what we want, and that is what we should have, but from the outside looking in, it appears that the officials want it their own way.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I thank the Minister for being willing to assess alternative options—he has talked to my council in Southwark about such an alternative—but in criticising the officials, is the hon. Gentleman not questioning the Minister's ability to oversee the Department?

Andrew Bingham: No, not at all, because the Minister has done that by making this decision. The officials wanted Buxton closed and everything shipped to Chesterfield. I wanted Buxton open. Having listened to all sides of the argument—in the Chamber, in Westminster Hall and in private meetings—he came up with a compromise, so I think he has been very robust. I will not criticise him. I might be wrong—I hope to be proved wrong—but I think the officials wanted it a certain way, but they did not get it, and by tardiness they seem to be trying another way of getting it.

I commend the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood for bringing this debate to the Chamber. The decision has been made and we have had these debates before, so this debate might be after the fact, but it is still a good debate to have. This is the Thursday before the Easter recess, yet attendance is good, so it is obviously an issue.

I ask the Minister for some assurances. Will he look at this issue, as a matter of urgency, to ensure that any further administrative work necessary to implement his decision to move the work—the vast majority of work, not just the odd case to make me, the people or the council happy—is done quickly, for the peace of mind of my constituents, as well as the magistrates, who, we must remember, perform a valuable public service for little recompense? I know for a fact that, if the work moved to Chesterfield, we might lose magistrates from the bench. Will he also make it clear to the officials that by “sending work to Stockport”, I mean the majority of work, not just a little bit? Finally, will he pay attention to the work of the officials? I hate to be critical but they seem to have a different agenda from the one that he and people elected to other bodies wanted. If he could give me those assurances, I would be very grateful.

12.43 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Like the hon. Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham), I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for calling this debate. I also agree with him that this was a flawed consultation and decision, particularly in relation to Bridgend magistrates court and law courts, which house state-of-the-art court facilities in which the public purse has invested hundreds of thousands of pounds for repairs, modernisation and renovation. That is all to be thrown away.

Following the closure, the court's civil, family and tribunal work will go to Port Talbot justice centre and the magistrates work to Cardiff and the Vale court. I hope that this local example will illustrate the appalling consequences of the Government's irresponsible decision to close 86 courts and tribunals across England and Wales, as well as their total failure to understand the geography of Wales.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): No surprise there.

Mrs Moon: Indeed, no surprise.

Realistically in south Wales, one has to move north or south to the M4 before travelling east or west. Before reaching the M4, there are very few chances of moving east or west, so the movement of these courts will cause huge problems for people's capacity to reach the new venues.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend also agree that the consultation and decisions, certainly in County Durham, assume that everyone has access to a private car and take no account of the time it will take to get to court—or the impossibility, in some case, of doing so—by public transport?

Mrs Moon: My hon. Friend makes the most valid of points. Yet again, the Government have failed to recognise the needs of the poor and the disadvantaged, particularly those who are victims or witnesses of crime, and their capacity to access the justice system.

By car, the journey from Bridgend to Cardiff can take an hour. Parking is a nightmare at many times of the day and is very expensive. Port Talbot justice centre is just under 15 miles away, but, depending on where someone lives in my constituency, it can take a minimum of 30 minutes to get there by car. For people on low incomes, who disproportionately depend on court and tribunal services, access to these sites will take longer and be more expensive. Car ownership in poor communities in Wales is particularly low: two thirds of those on working-age benefits do not have daily access to a car. I hope the Minister is listening to this. The majority of people travelling from Bridgend to Cardiff or Port Talbot to access legal services will therefore depend on expensive public transport links, but the timetables are a nightmare, especially if someone has to be in court by 9 o'clock or 10 o'clock and has childcare or caring commitments or a disability or if—God forbid—they miss the bus.

Mary Creagh: Or the bus doesn't turn up.

Mrs Moon: Or, indeed, if the bus doesn't turn up.

[Mrs Moon]

The bus journey from rural areas in my constituency to Cardiff is indirect and can take over two hours, and that is before getting to the bus station in Cardiff, which is a considerable distance from the court. The need to travel such long distances on a regular basis will disrupt the work of local police, as well as of probation, rehabilitation and child protection officers. It will also inconvenience the many local groups that offer services to people involved in the court system, including witnesses. We ought to be thinking far more carefully about protecting and supporting witnesses accessing courts. It is one thing to say, “Well, I don’t mind inconveniencing defendants”—even though these are people who still have not been found guilty—but what about people attending court to support the criminal justice service? We have to make it easy for people to come forward as witnesses, not introduce an additional burden into their daily lives.

It will be expensive and administratively burdensome to transport defendants from custody in the brand-new, state-of-the-art police station at Bridewell in Bridgend. The police there will be spending hours transporting people up and down the M4, when they could have accessed the local court in Bridgend. Parc prison in Bridgend will have to transport prisoners up and down the M4, instead of taking the 10-minute journey into the centre of Bridgend. The transport costs will be ridiculous. The Ministry of Justice is transporting the costs from its own budget to another budget.

The integrity of the British justice system is at stake here. It has evolved over the centuries and has remained remarkably sensitive to the distinctive formulations and priorities of local communities. The close proximity of the magistrates system to people’s daily lives is at the root of the legitimacy and authority of the system. No attempt seems to have been made to ascertain whether the magistrates in Bridgend will continue to serve in their posts when closures go ahead. I have to tell the Minister that local magistrates contacted me to say that they do not think they will be able to carry on—because of health, work commitments and family issues. The additional travelling time and the additional commitment in hours of work is going to make it impossible for many of them to continue. I think that is a huge loss to the local community’s sense of engagement with the criminal justice system and the civil justice system. The quality of justice as administered and implemented in local communities is also threatened by the decision, because the additional caseloads at both Bridgend and Caerphilly will push Cardiff court’s capacity to the limit. The closure could lead to a heavy reliance on electronic communication.

I know some people view electronic communications as the way forward, but I would have to say again that they do not live in Wales. For people living in the Welsh valleys, broadband communication is a nightmare. I live on the coast in Porthcawl, and my Skype communication is frequently not good throughout the day; with 180° of sea in front of us, broadband communication is not at its best. These technologies are untested, unreliable and their use in court challenges the important principle of our justice system—the right to a fair trial and the right to face our accusers. Clear communication is integral to the smooth and upright administration of justice, and

there is no substitute for face-to-face dialogue. Where it is desired, it should be the first option available to individuals entering court.

The Law Society of England and Wales has registered serious concerns about the use of video-link technology in magistrates court trials. Magistrates have voiced the concern that it will be difficult for the judge to maintain order in the court if defendants and witnesses are not present in person. There are also doubts about whether the broadband connection in Bridgend is of sufficient quality to sustain a video link. As I have said, the region suffers from notoriously poor broadband connectivity.

I fear that for some of my constituents, the cheapest and simplest option will be to plead guilty rather than face the difficulties of navigating the complexities of the local transport and electronic communication systems and the destruction to their daily lives and to their family lives and commitments. When witnessing a crime, many people will say, “I don’t know whether I want to come forward as a witness when it is going to mean additional time and cost burdens to me.”

The courts alone do not deliver justice. Orbiting courts are networks of organisations that provide integrated probation, rehabilitation and victim support services. Before the trial opens, they do the hard work of preparing people who are unfamiliar with the courts system to stand as witnesses or defendants. After the case has closed, they help to translate, implement rulings and monitor their impact within the community. The key to their success is local knowledge and the close working relationship they have with other service providers. Removing courts from communities will fragment and weaken these complex and closely knit networks, with serious implications for the quality of local justice and the cohesion and safety of local communities.

I have grave concerns about the serious impact of closure on my local solicitor firms. Many are based in my constituency because of the Bridgend law courts and the whole network of courts in Bridgend, and I fear that many will close, further reducing access to legal advice for many people living across my constituency. The town will lose many high-paid and skilled jobs, and the courts bring people from the surrounding area into the town. The closure will affect the retail and service sectors of the local economy and contribute to the degeneration of the town centre.

In short, the relocation of the court services and the subsequent breakdown in Bridgend’s legal infrastructure will destabilise the community and undermine local confidence in the justice system for a generation. The court closure decision reflects the priorities of a Department isolated in Westminster that fails to take into account the geographic and the social mix of Wales. With so little understanding of how local communities work, public trust in our legal and political institutions will be further eroded. I urge the Minister to reverse the decision on Bridgend. I am sure it is not too late. I hope he has been listening.

12.55 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this debate. We have already heard powerful speeches on the subject. Let me say at once that I do not rise specifically to raise

any constituency points, because the excellent magistrates court in Bromley continues in operation and is busy. I am concerned, however, as Chairman of the Justice Committee; the matter of closures has been raised in our discussions in this and the previous Parliament on a number of occasions. Although we are not dealing with a specific inquiry into the matter, it raises its head when we look at other important issues.

In fairness to the Minister, who I have always found to be a model of courtesy and openness in his dealings with me and the Select Committee, I must say that a balance has to be struck. Court closures have gone on through most of my life, first as a practising lawyer and then as a Member of Parliament. I cut my teeth as a young barrister going to courts in Essex villages, such as Castle Hedingham, Halstead and places of that kind, which sat perhaps once a month. They are now gone. I cannot say that at the end of the day the quality of justice was permanently and wholly undermined by those closures.

Albert Owen *rose*—

Robert Neill: Let me just make my point. We need a sense of balance. I think the hon. Gentleman is about to make that point, and he might well say some things later on with which I shall agree.

Albert Owen: I am certain that that will be the case. The hon. Gentleman is right that there was a big review of courts and some court closures in the last Parliament. At that time, only a few years ago, the Government told us that the remaining courts were needed in the community. Nothing has changed. It is just the Government's attitude that has changed; when it comes to local justice, nothing has changed at all.

Robert Neill: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, particularly in respect of rural areas. In fairness, though, there were court closure programmes under Labour Governments just as much as there were under Conservative Governments, so it is not an issue over which any one party can claim advantage. The hon. Gentleman made a very fair point about access to justice, but it is not the case that one particular party is more or less committed to it. The issue is how to balance what is largely a centrally funded service with local needs. That is what we need to deal with, and it has been raised as an issue in the Justice Committee.

It is fair to acknowledge that the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood was quite right when she referred to the comments of Lord Bingham of Cornhill. I have often thought that his book, "The Rule of Law", should be made compulsory reading for Members of both Houses, not least because, although written by a distinguished lawyer, it is remarkably concise. It is worth bearing in mind that the common law doctrine of accessibility, to which the hon. Lady referred, grew up at a time when there were far fewer courts, distances between them were much greater, public transport was virtually non-existent and journeys took much longer. Everything has to be put into context; it is not a matter of absolutes; it is all about getting the balance right, as some hon. Members have said.

I repeat that there were court closures under Labour Governments, and the most recent set of closures occurred during the Parliament of 2010 to 2015. The Justice

Committee was interested in the effect, because part of the argument has been the need at a time of pressure on the public finances to get maximum value for money. That is understandable, as is the fact that there has been a decline in the use of courts, particularly magistrates courts, because of the reduction in crime. I am told that use across the magistrates courts estate decreased by something in the order of 43% during that previous Parliament. That is not the whole picture, but it is fair to put it into the balance. I remember some magistrates courts being in poor condition—old, ill equipped and without the facilities to deal with the necessary separation of witnesses, victims and legal advisers, to which the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) referred. So not all closures are bad. There has to be a process of renewal and, sometimes, of consolidation.

Mrs Moon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Robert Neill: I will, just this once.

Mrs Moon: I am sorry to intervene on the hon. Gentleman, but my point is this. We have spent hundreds of thousands of pounds on the project, and on making it viable for the future. Is it not nonsensical, having spent that money, to waste it by closing courts?

Robert Neill: I understand the point that the hon. Lady is making, but I will not go into individual cases, because that is not the job that the Select Committee has sought to take on.

In October 2015, following the 2010 to 2014 closure programme—the court estate reform programme, as it was described—during the previous Parliament, the Committee took evidence from Natalie Ceeney, chief executive of HM Courts and Tribunals Service. We asked, in particular, what progress had been made—*[Interruption.]* I hope that that is not my clerk or someone ringing me up. I think it is worse when it happens in court, Madam Deputy Speaker. I can only apologise.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Let me say, for the avoidance of doubt, that it is worse when it happens here. For the moment, however, we will ignore it, and allow the hon. Gentleman to continue his excellent speech.

Robert Neill: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The honest truth is that it is worse anyway.

As I was saying, we wanted to know what progress had been made in the selling off of the courts that had been closed as part of the 2010 to 2014 programme. We were told that, as of 23 October last year, 10 court buildings remained unsold. It would be helpful if the Minister could update us. If courts are to be closed, it is important for them to be disposed of in a timely manner, given that one of the prime arguments for closures is the need to secure economies and value for money. There is certainly no virtue in continuing to spend money on mothballing unused buildings.

I agree with other Members that the issue of physical proximity and journey times is not unique to rural areas. When the last Labour Government were conducting court closure and amalgamation programmes in London, I made the point, as a London Assembly Member, that

[Robert Neill]

a journey in peak time from south-east London to, say, Wells Street—where a great deal of family court work was, at the time, being centralised—was likely to take an hour or an hour and a half, and that, if care or family cases were involved, that would impose an onerous and probably unfair burden on people who were in a difficult, perhaps vulnerable, state. Such issues do apply to urban areas as well.

The issue of longer travel times has been raised with the Committee, particularly in the context of our current inquiry into the role of the magistracy. There is a balance to be struck between the efficiency of the system and the localness of justice. Earlier this week we took evidence from the National Bench Chairmen's Forum, which does what it says: it is the body representing the chairs of benches. The forum expressed concern about the issue. Interestingly, a representative of one of the benches in north Wales made exactly the same point as the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) about the difficulty of getting mobile and other coverage in very rural areas. In fairness, it was not suggested that the problem was insuperable, but the point was made that if courts were to be amalgamated in such areas, it was important to get the technology right and in place first.

The magistrates expressed a fear—not only in oral evidence but in written evidence, which is available on the Committee's website—that courts would inevitably be concentrated in more urban areas, that there would inevitably be a temptation for magistrates to be drawn from areas in the immediate proximity of the courts, and that rural areas would consequently be under-represented areas on the benches. I think that that is an important and legitimate point. It was also pointed out to us that larger benches—and some benches now contain up to 1,000 magistrates, or thereabouts—placed much greater burdens on the chairs of those benches. It was suggested that we should think about what support could be given to those chairing very large benches with considerable workloads in administrative matters that were not previously envisaged. Again, I do not think that the problem is insuperable, but we must ensure that that support is provided.

On the basis of the evidence that we heard, it is fair to say that members of the senior judiciary are much more positive about the opportunities that arise from the use of digital and other modern technology, and consider that it can alleviate some of the pressures that arise from court processes. On 23 February, the Lord Chief Justice gave evidence to us about digitisation in the courts service. He praised the approach taken by HM Courts and Tribunals in building its digital case system unit by unit rather than on a monolithic single contract—and I think it right to give praise where it is due—but he was also alert to the need to deal with digital exclusion.

The Master of the Rolls, Lord Dyson, while recognising that there was much value to be gained from the use of IT to overcome some of the access-to-court issues, also made the point—with which I think we would all agree—that the Government's track record on IT projects was “not exactly shining”. Sir James Munby, president of the Family Division, said that a digitised divorce service would provide real opportunities to reduce the burdens on people at a difficult time in their lives, but he was “disappointed” by the lack of progress so far. The Senior

President of Tribunals, Sir Ernest Ryder, had “reservations” about the Department's capacity to deliver the modernisation programme, and that is a point that I particularly wanted to make today.

I think it worries many of us that, while a number of fairly senior practitioners in the field say that they have no problem with the modernisation programme and—in some instances—accept the rationale for estates rationalisation, a greater move towards digitisation, the use of video conferencing and so on, there is doubt about whether either the Ministry of Justice or HM Courts and Tribunals Service has the necessary technical and professional capacity to deliver on those issues. That concerns me as much in relation to the estates disposal programme as in relation to the digitisation programme.

There is now a very good family law centre in east London, which is part of the combined family court that we now have at Canary Wharf. It opened in December 2014 and is working well, but its opening was delayed. It was apparent to us that the delay was partly due to the fact that the estate managers who were dealing with the project on behalf of the Government, in house, had spent the better part of a year pursuing a site in the Canary Wharf area that was never realistically going to be available at an acceptable rent or on acceptable terms. The commercial property operators with whom they were dealing were understandably running rings around them.

Government Departments and agencies often do not have the level of direct commercial expertise in tough, hard money negotiations that they need if they are to deliver the courts rationalisation, disposal and, subsequently, renewal programme. I hope that the Minister will tell us what is being done to strengthen the technical, managerial and professional expertise that is available to the Government. I hope he will also concede that the process need not be carried out in house, and that, in some circumstances, it is very proper to buy in specialist advice from the legal and property sector to ensure that the Government get the best possible deal and the changes are made in a timely manner.

The Magistrates Association and the judiciary have drawn our attention to the possibility of overcoming some of the pressures caused by a loss of local connection, which are of legitimate and genuine concern, by using satellite courts to hear cases that may require less security than those that are heard at a main magistrates court. It might be possible to use a public building, closer to the locality where the offence had been committed. I can think of circumstances in which it would not be too difficult to make use of, say, a town hall or a civic centre. Intelligent listing can be done now that more digital listing is being used, and it could be used in cases that were unlikely to have custody requirements or a large number of witnesses. In cases involving a summary-only offence and in which the witnesses were likely to be local, it should be possible, with sensible management and support for the bench, to get magistrates from that locality to hear the case. We ought to explore more ways of doing that.

We have also suggested to magistrates and to the bench forums that we should look at some of the existing learning in the local government world. Some of the issues that confront magistrates servicing rural petty sessional divisions are not dissimilar to those

confronting district councillors in rural areas. Some local authorities have done significant work on online decision making and on finding ways of setting up delegated local area committees. Those would not be dissimilar to the satellite courts that I have mentioned. There is experience in other areas that the judicial world could learn from, and I urge the Minister to encourage his Department as well as those in the judiciary and the magistrates to take that on board. This applies to the legal profession as well. The Committee has received the representations that other Members have referred to, and there is scope for sensible co-working between lawyers on some of these issues.

I am grateful for your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, and, I hope, for your forgiveness. I hope that when the Minister replies to this important debate he will be able to respond to these points, which have struck a chord across the board among members of the Select Committee.

1.11 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow such thoughtful speeches from everyone, including the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon). I should also like to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) on securing this debate.

Wakefield magistrates court is one of the 86 Courts and Tribunals Service hearing centres affected by this latest round of closures. That figure represents nearly one fifth of the total court estate and a cut of 20% to our access to local justice. Wakefield's court is a vital community resource that provides access to justice for people in Wakefield, and its closure will undermine that access.

The closure is part of a series of changes to the justice system since 2010 which have been, shall we say, a little more stop-start. We have certainly seen a series of changes in the past month. The Justice Secretary has scrapped restrictions on the number of books that prisoners can have. He has also scrapped court charges of up to £1,200 for defendants who plead guilty. I welcome his latest U-turn to reverse the imposition of legal aid contracts in January, which would have harmed access to legal aid in my constituency and across the country. However, he did that only after 99 legal challenges and a judicial review. I shall say a bit more about legal aid later.

In September last year I launched a public petition opposing the closure of Wakefield court, and it has been signed by hundreds of people. The court closure is the latest threat to Wakefield city centre, because it comes alongside the announcement by the Post Office that Wakefield post office should be run as a franchise. That will affect the whole city centre, because if it closes and goes into W.H. Smith or one of our shopping centres, shoppers will no longer be drawn to the high street. That will have a huge knock-on effect on the city centre economy, as will the fact that we will no longer have police officers, council officers and lawyers from the court going into the city centre at lunchtime to buy a delicious sandwich from one of the many pasty, pie and sandwich shops that we are proud to have there.

There is cross-party concern about these closures. It is important that justice is not only done and seen to be done but that it is seen to be done locally. The closures will also result in more failed cases, as victims and witnesses will have to travel long distances to get to court. That will also waste police time, because officers will have to travel further to those courts. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend said, this is just passing on cuts. In this case, the cuts will be outsourced to the police service, because it is the police who will have to spend time travelling from Wakefield to Leeds accompanying defendants or to give evidence. In the case of the family courts, it will be council officers' time that will be spent in that way. This is not a cost-neutral solution. If we are looking at whole-government accounting, it would be useful for the Justice Committee to carry out a whole-cost inquiry into this matter, to determine the whole-cost implications. It is unacceptable to make a cut in one place that has to be absorbed by other parts of the system.

Local justice will not be seen to be done if Wakefield court closes, because the local press will not turn up to report cases being heard in courts many miles away. This will have a real impact on the excellent work being done by the journalists on the *Wakefield Express*, who go along to the court diligently each week to report on what is happening locally. A local solicitor has told me that the consequences of the closure could be catastrophic for some of Wakefield's law firms. Solicitors will go where the work is, and firms that do not have offices in Leeds have talked about the possibility of moving out of Wakefield. That would be yet another big on-cost to our city centre. Those firms cannot afford to be in a city where there is no court, because they cannot afford to pay regular expenses for their lawyers to travel to Leeds.

The Government cut funding for our justice system by £2.1 billion in the last Parliament, with a further £900 million of cuts to come by the end of this Parliament. Despite those cuts, Wakefield magistrates court has been performing to a high standard. The Government said in their own consultation document that the building was "well used" and, according to the Law Society, Wakefield court is a "busy court" operating at a higher capacity than the England and Wales average. For the year to date, our conviction rate for cases in Wakefield district and magistrates court is 87%, compared with the national target of 85%. It also has a very low overall attrition rate of just 10%, compared with the national attrition rate target of 15%. This is particularly important in regard to protecting the vulnerable.

A couple of weeks ago I met Mabs Hussain, the new district commander of Wakefield police. He is rightly proud of the work that Wakefield police are doing to achieve a very high conviction rate for domestic violence. That has certainly changed for the better since I was elected as the MP for Wakefield 10 years ago. I can remember asking for a specialist domestic violence court for Wakefield and being told by a court official, almost with a pat on my hand, that I did not really understand domestic violence and that the trouble with such allegations was that he would find the parties involved sitting holding hands outside the court. It is always nice to be told what I do and do not understand by court officials. I left him in no doubt about my understanding and suggested that he perhaps needed to understand a little more about domestic violence and abuse cases. We have

[Mary Creagh]

worked hard on this, and the council has worked hard on its Safe at Home project for victims of domestic violence. We have a conviction rate of 81% compared with a national target of 75%, along with a very low attrition rate. Commander Hussain is rightly concerned about what the court closure would mean in this regard. Wakefield also has a very low average for the number of days from first hearing to trial: 65 days compared with 103 days nationally.

This is the second round of court closures in Wakefield since 2010. We had the closure of Pontefract magistrates court in 2013, and the work of that court and its staff have now transferred to Wakefield. The latest closure will mean that all parties—victims, defendants, witnesses and solicitors—will need to travel into Leeds, which will significantly increase their travel times. The Minister has said that 95% of citizens will still be able to reach their court by car, but we have already heard that the courts deal with the poorest and most vulnerable people in our society. According to the Law Society, 47% of Wakefield court users will have to travel for more than an hour in each direction to reach a court by public transport. That will reduce access to justice.

I am concerned about the impact of longer, more expensive journeys on victims, witnesses, defendants and magistrates. Those living in Horbury and Ossett, or in villages such as Netherton or Middlestown, will have difficulty getting to Leeds by public transport on the sporadic bus services. What about the people who live in the old pit villages such as Hemsworth, Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford? They either go directly to Leeds or have to come into Wakefield on the irregular bus services, which often do not turn up, and change on to a train and then travel by foot, putting them at greater risk of bumping into the people whom they may be appearing against in court. I can tell the House from personal experience that that is not a comfortable place for a victim to be in. People on low incomes are also unable to claim back the travel expenses incurred when attending court. Some will never have been to Leeds in their lives, or perhaps only a few times. Such people do not have access to Google Maps on their smartphones and can easily get lost, and we heard earlier about the case of the man in his 80s who had to appear in court against his neighbour.

I want to give a concrete example from when I witnessed antisocial behaviour outside some school gates in Wakefield. I said to the lady that it happened to that I had seen it, she reported it to the police, and the case against this aggressive individual came up during the general election campaign. It was scheduled to be heard at 10 am, so I gave up my morning's canvassing in the interest of local justice and seeing justice done. I sat in the victims room with the complainant, her husband and her neighbour, who had turned up in support—people often need one or two other people to support them. The defendant turned up with his solicitor and was then advised to plead guilty.

Until someone becomes a victim, it is hard to realise how important it is that witnesses and victims turn up. If they do not, the case will not proceed and the defendant gets away. That was brought home to me 20 years ago when I was the victim of assault. I stopped a large, rampaging group of girls who were kicking a

young woman on a zebra crossing in north London and who went on to assault a tube worker and then me. It was only when I turned up at court that I realised how important it was that the victims were in that room that day when those girls pleaded guilty to the charge of affray. Nobody knows that until bad things happen to them, but it is important.

If people from my constituency have to drop their children at school at 8.50 am or 9 am, wait for the bus that comes at 9.15 am, get off the bus at quarter to 10, get a 10 am train into Leeds, arrive into Leeds at 10.15 am and walk to the court, it is probably 10.30 am and, if the case is listed for 10 am, it has already failed. This is really important for people in Wakefield. If the change has to happen, Wakefield cases should be listed in the afternoon to enable people to attend. The childcare issue, particularly for victims of domestic violence, cannot be overstated. Young people, victims of domestic abuse and all those who rely on public transport will be grievously affected. The Government are erecting hurdles for witnesses to overcome and that should not be the role of the justice system.

Legal professionals in Wakefield have told me how good our local court is at delivering local justice. There are concerns, such as those mentioned by the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst and my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend, about magistrates having no local knowledge or understanding—people who do not know about life and local circumstances in Wakefield and the surrounding villages. We will lose local decisions on local justice matters. The Government talk the talk about devolving power to communities, but their every action takes power away from local communities.

We have heard some creative examples of where court hearings could be held, but I am insistent that victims should feel comfortable and protected when they walk into court. Wakefield Council has a court chamber, and we have a county court building as well, where Bill Nighy did some filming a couple of months ago, which was an exciting day for our city—it certainly was for me. Such buildings could be used in specific cases.

On access to justice, the Lord Chief Justice stated two weeks ago:

“Our system of justice has become unaffordable to most”.

The Law Society describes access to justice as being “on the verge of a crisis”.

Funding for civil cases has fallen by 62% since civil legal aid was cut. The closures will only serve to worsen that trend.

On the legal aid changes, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara), is well aware of the case of Bobby and Christi Shepherd from my constituency, who died from carbon monoxide poisoning while on holiday in Corfu. Their parents, Neil Shepherd and Sharon Wood, were refused legal aid at first because lawyers are not usually required at inquests. I am eternally grateful to the Minister, who was able to work with us and the Legal Aid Agency to get the decision overturned after we petitioned the Prime Minister and secured a meeting with him.

There is another similar case. Zane Gbangbola died at his home in Chertsey during the floods in February 2014 and his father, Kye Gbangbola, was left paralysed

from the waist down after a cardiac arrest. The parents believe that Zane may have been killed by cyanide gas that leaked from a former landfill site through the floodwater. Kye and his wife, Nicole Lawler, were told by the Legal Aid Agency that their request for legal aid had been rejected on the grounds that Zane's inquest did not concern the public interest. I have discussed the matter with the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) and hope that the Legal Aid Agency will review the funding as a matter of the utmost urgency. I hope that the Minister will personally intervene once again so that the family can get justice and will not have to present their own case and examine witnesses, the father doing so from his wheelchair, at the inquest.

The Minister has suggested that those too far away to attend court could appear via video link. Wakefield court already has up-to-date technological facilities, including its own prison-to-court video service, which is important because the constituency has two prisons: Wakefield prison, which houses high-risk offenders, and New Hall women's prison.

In evidence to the Public Accounts Committee last week, Natalie Ceeney, chief executive of Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service, said that she had negotiated with the Treasury during the spending review to ensure that proceeds from the sale of any court building can be reinvested in modernisation. However, the Ministry of Justice has yet to dispose of 15 closed courts from its 2010 closure programme, at a cost to the taxpayer of at least £40,000 a month to secure and maintain, with figures not available for three sites. The old Pontefract magistrates court has fallen into rack and ruin in the town centre, and I do not want the same to happen in Wakefield. We already have a derelict Crown court building, which the council had to compulsorily purchase and will have to spend money on to prevent it from falling down. Although the savings are made nationally, local people pick up the cost through antisocial behaviour and ensuring that derelict buildings are secure and properly maintained.

From the Secretary of State for Justice, we have had changes to legal aid, prison reform, which is welcome, and he has U-turned on a range of issues, but there have also been mistakes that have cost money. The legal aid contract is an example of an intervention in the market that threw an entire system up in the air, causing huge upset and concern for people and their livelihoods, only for it to be withdrawn at the last minute. What have been the costs to local solicitors and law firms across the country from bidding for contracts and winning them or not winning them? The Minister would do well to listen before making another costly and damaging error.

Wakefield is a city with great people and great transport connections from north to south, but not from east to west—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Lady, who is making some very important points, and the House appreciates that, but I hope that she will soon be drawing her remarks to a close, because a significant number of other people are waiting to speak.

Mary Creagh: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I shall conclude my remarks by saying that justice is supposed to convict the guilty and protect the innocent, and there is a grave risk that these proposals will do the reverse.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. As there are so many hon. Members waiting to speak, I now have to impose a time limit of eight minutes.

1.30 pm

William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), and I congratulate the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this important debate. I am pleased to speak in it, and I wish to speak up for the principle of local justice and the vital importance of the courthouse in Stockport for my constituents. I welcome last month's decision by the Ministry of Justice to keep the Stockport courthouse open, particularly in the wake of my campaign with the Ministry of Justice and having had many productive conversations with the Minister.

As many hon. Members have said, a key principle of our justice system, one that underpins both the magistrates courts and Crown courts, is that justice should be delivered by one's peers. By extension, that gives rise to the requirement for local justice to be administered by local people within the local area. Those principles have given rise to the patchwork of jurisdictions and local courts that make up the current structure of Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service. Those principles, under the current courts system, also give rise to the important practical benefits that help to deliver justice effectively. They provide a shorter distance to travel for the relevant parties in cases, including defendants, victims, and witnesses, many of whom are often accompanied by their families and friends to court, and for the magistrates, clerks and staff of the court. They also give rise to smaller benches having a local identity and a social or team aspect. Finally, the distribution of courts not only contributes to local communities, but serves as a catalyst to small micro-economies—we heard about the pies and pasties in Wakefield—and associated services, as well as to the legal professions that the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) mentioned.

Out of respect for those principles and practical benefits, I also opposed the proposed merger of the local justice area of Greater Manchester, which was considered in a public consultation by the Ministry of Justice at a similar time to the one on courthouses. I made the separate case to the Ministry that in the event of any changes to that local justice area, not all the business of any new merged LJA should be conducted in the Manchester city courts, but rather a significant proportion should still be conducted in courts across Greater Manchester, including that in Stockport.

I made the case some months ago to the Ministry of Justice to urge that Stockport's court should remain open and retain at least a significant proportion of its current magistrates court and county court functions. Stockport court has 47 staff and was running at only 54% capacity in 2014, with annual running costs of £879,000. Please allow me to explain why I felt the way I did. The first reason was that those impacted by the proposed closure would be the court users, including victims and witnesses in the magistrates courts, and those involved in small claims, bankruptcy and evictions in the county court. All those are groups of vulnerable people who need the security and convenience of local

[*William Wragg*]

services, at what is an already stressful time for them. The closure of Stockport courthouse could have severely restricted access to justice and may have ended up being a false economy by simply shifting the operating costs to other areas.

Robert Neill: I am glad to hear my hon. Friend mention that Stockport court is not to be closed. That was particularly welcomed by members of our Committee, because it also houses a very successful problem-solving court, which has been recognised by the Lord Chief Justice and the Lord Chancellor as one area where we could do much more to combine jurisdictions and get a much more effective use of judicial capacity and better outcomes.

William Wragg: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He raises an important point about the innovative work being carried out in the Stockport courthouse building, and I am grateful to him for drawing that to the House's attention. The closure of the court would have left the town without a court and would have meant that my constituents would have had to travel to Manchester in the quest for justice. That would not only have seen them incurring additional expense, but it would have had potentially negative impacts on vulnerable people, and disabled people in particular. Any such closure could also increase the amount of defendants not turning up for hearings, thus wasting the resources of the court and meaning that more arrest warrants would be issued, with consequential impacts on police resources.

Moreover, from a local economic perspective, if the closure had gone ahead in its proposed form, all cases would have been heard in Manchester and there would no longer have been a magistrates court between Chesterfield and Manchester. The Chesterfield and Stockport case was something my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) mentioned. In addition, the closure of the Stockport court would have had an impact on not only the employees of the courthouse, but local businesses, particularly those in the legal profession.

I understand that in the context of the wider pressures on public finances some savings have to be made somewhere, and I acknowledge that the Minister has a very unenviable task in the difficult decision he is facing. I also have sympathy for other local courts in surrounding areas, many of which can equally apply these same arguments. Other local communities have strong allegiances to their local courts, and I am particularly sorry to hear that the courts at Bury, Oldham and Trafford are earmarked for closure. However, I think there was a stronger case in Stockport's favour, in particular, because it is one of the most heavily used courts in the area. The stated aim of the reforms to the HMCTS estate is to reduce surplus capacity by closing courts that are unused or underused, or that are simply unsuitable for the services that we now need to provide in them. During the 2014-15 financial year, Stockport magistrates court was utilised at approximately 54% of its capacity—that was the highest level of occupancy of any of the Greater Manchester courts. In addition, Stockport courthouse is a high-quality building, only

recently having been refurbished in 2010. I therefore cannot see how the closure of Stockport magistrates court could reasonably have been deemed as a cost-saving exercise.

The Government announcement that Stockport court will now not be closed is good news for people living in Stockport and the surrounding areas, including my constituency. I made a submission to the Ministry of Justice as part of the consultation process, and also attended meetings with the Minister, along with my neighbouring MP, the hon. Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey), to whom I pay particular tribute for the amount of work that she did, and my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson). I am pleased that we were able to take this cross-party approach and work co-operatively with one another. I am pleased that our arguments were listened to by the Government, in what I felt—I know others may disagree—was a genuine consultation exercise, particularly given the Minister's intervention in that process.

In summary, I feel that Stockport courthouse should remain open, and I am pleased that my view has been vindicated. Such a decision is important in order to preserve the long-standing principle of local justice being administered by local people within the local area; to provide practical benefits for both the parties in legal cases and the court staff; and to ensure that the court can continue to contribute to the local community and economy. It is also important because the court currently provides a relatively high level of occupancy compared with that of many other courts in Greater Manchester and surrounding districts.

I further urge that the continued operation of Stockport courthouse be incorporated into whichever future model of local justice area structure for Greater Manchester the Ministry of Justice decides to pursue. Can the Minister shed any further light on that matter today? I also welcome the fact that, as part of this reform package, the Government are investing more than £700 million over the next four years to update the court and tribunal estate, installing modern IT systems and making the justice system more efficient and effective for modern users.

As I said earlier, I have sympathy for other local courts in surrounding areas and other areas around the country, and I am glad that many colleagues have been here today to stand up for their local courts. Perhaps somewhat cheekily, may I say that in a week characterised by a refreshingly open attitude on the part of the Government to showing their listening mode, I hope that the Minister will be able to hear some of the important pleas of other right hon. and hon. Members here this afternoon?

1.39 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I certainly agree with the last remark made by the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (William Wragg), and I hope that the Minister is in listening mode as we pursue this. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on the way in which she opened this important debate and on securing it—I helped her, along with some other colleagues. We were denied the chance to have this debate in February, when

the announcement about the courts was made on the last day by way of a written statement, so this is our first opportunity to do this.

I want to join the tributes that have been paid to the Minister who is not only a civil and decent man, but has been attentive to me and to the delegations that I have brought down from north Wales—delegations of solicitors and representatives from the citizens advice bureaux and other agencies. We speak with one voice on this, as it is an important issue that goes across the whole local community. I say those things of the Minister not just because he is a black belt in martial arts, but because he genuinely took the time to sit down with us and to go through the detail. Quite simply, the policy is wrong. The one-size-fits-all court closure programme is both crude and wrong, and it is against the principle of local justice, which is the cornerstone of the British justice system.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) said, the programme is also against the Government's policy of localism. The Government talk localism, but they seem to be centralising everything. I am talking about not just the courts in north Wales, but the tax offices, which have been moved from one place to another to be centralised in Cardiff. It is completely wrong to talk devolution but to start delivering centralisation, and we need to hold the Government to account on that.

I want to concentrate on the decision to close Holyhead and Llangefni courts and to move the business to Caernarfon, which is a great distance way. That decision was made simply to save costs. As I said when I intervened on the Chair of the Justice Committee, in the last Parliament there was a comprehensive review in which I made exactly the same representations that I have made this time. Those representations were upheld then because they were seen by the Department to be right, and nothing has changed. We were in a recession at the time and there needed to be cost savings, but the areas were deemed to be valuable to serving local justice. I make that point again, because this is all about cost savings, and those who are losing out are the local people and the poorest in society.

True to his word, the Minister wrote to me—I am sure that he did the same to many Members—and asked that senior officials from Her Majesty's Court and Tribunals Service meet me to discuss technical arrangements for local alternative provision. I can tell the Minister that that meeting will take place just after Easter, and I will put a constructive argument to them, but it will be the same argument that I put in the last Parliament and the same argument that I have put this time, because it has broad support and it is right for my area, which is a peripheral area of Wales that has seen lots of closures in principal Government services. We need, and deserve, to have functional courts in those areas, and I will argue for that.

Holyhead is the biggest town in my constituency. It is on the periphery of the area and it is a major ports town. It has one of the busiest ports in the United Kingdom. In the response to the court closure programme, it was confirmed that it was too difficult for court users in the area to make long journeys to a court. An alternative part-time court is being considered on Anglesey,

but that is not good enough. Justice should be carried out not on an ad hoc part-time basis, but on a professional full-time basis.

The response goes on to say:

“Where attendance at a hearing is needed other civic or public buildings could be used for hearings”.

Again, there will be costs to adapt such buildings. I understand that the current buildings have been run down, but the maintenance that has been carried out on them over the years will be wasted if they are just left.

The Chair of the Justice Select Committee mentioned utilisation rates. The rate for the buildings in Holyhead and Llangefni is between 20% and 31%, which is a very low figure, but I am aware that cases have already been moved from those courts to the main court in Caernarfon. There has been this movement by stealth of business away from certain courts with a view to closing them down in the future. As I have said, that has happened to other services in my area over the past three to four years, although I do accept that there have been closures over many, many years. Again, we had a recent review, which the Select Committee considered, but here we are again. What is next? If we have part-time courts, it will only be a matter of time before they are closed.

Let me turn now to digital connections and virtual courts. I am not a Luddite; I understand the need to modernise, but if things can be done in a proper manner, then they should be. It is simply silly to suggest that these virtual courts will replace other courts right across the country when the digital infrastructure is not in place. We need a coherent plan. I have been working with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to improve mobile communications. I do understand that many people have nimby tendencies and do not want masts in their area, but we can work on that. There are many Government buildings in those areas in which mobile communications could be sited, so we need to work together to adopt a coherent plan for the future. I will meet officials to make the case for the retention of court provision in my area.

I talked about closing by stealth and about our having a major port. Clearly, there are issues to do with border control. The detention cells have moved from Holyhead port to Caernarfon, which is a great distance to travel and means that police time is being wasted. Private provision is often used, which is very, very costly, so it makes sense to keep the courts. Those courts were put there in the first place because they were strategically important, and that remains the case today.

I hope that the Minister is listening, and that he will give the go-ahead and the flexibility to those officials whom I am meeting. If no alternative provision is practical—for technical or other reasons—those courts should be retained, which means that we will still have local justice in the periphery areas of north-west Wales. The people of my area deserve that. The court system is the cornerstone of British justice, and we need to retain it. The people of north Wales speak with one voice on this matter.

1.46 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen). I congratulate the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this debate. Given the

[Kevin Foster]

impact of this decision on Torquay, I was pleased that, as a member of the Backbench Business Committee, I was able to vote for this debate.

It will come as no surprise to the Minister that I was obviously disappointed with the decision to close Torquay magistrates court. He will be aware that the court has provided local justice for many years. Concerns were raised by the police and many others about the closure. As was mentioned in the opening speech, we are talking about not just people answering charges who will need to go elsewhere, but witnesses, victims and all the others who are associated with the cases that are heard before a local magistrates court.

For me, a magistrates court has always been about local people sitting in judgment on local crimes—they might be matters that irritate local communities. In Crown courts, more emphasis is placed on the law overall, as the offences tend to require sentences with a greater focus on deterrence. The judge will also be more concerned that precedents are correctly followed in terms of sentencing people for the crimes that they have committed.

I am a member of the Public Accounts Committee. Last week, when we were examining the value-for-money issue in the criminal justice system, we considered the long-term plan for the courts estate. What brings that into focus in my constituency is the money that was spent over the past few years on Torquay magistrates court, not least the £111,000 spent last year on installing new windows. I accepted the argument that people did not wish to prejudge a closure decision, but it is quite clear that we should have a long-term plan. Where a court might be one selected for closure, it is obvious that there needs to be some restrictions on the amount of money being spent on it. The court is a welcome facility, but to see £600,000 spent on it in the years before it is due to close is almost a criminal waste of cash. Although I accept that Torquay magistrates court is a good facility, we do need to have a long-term asset plan for our courts estate to ensure that the investment that is to go into the wider network is targeted at those buildings in the best way possible. We do not want to find ourselves in a year or two's time debating buildings, which had investment as part of this programme, being proposed for closure as part of another programme. For me, there is a wider decision to be made than that to do with bricks, mortar and buildings. We must consider what type of cases are heard and in areas such as Torbay, which will now be without a magistrates court, what type of offences can be dealt with in alternative settings and locations.

For many offences tried in magistrates courts the prospect of custody is next to nil, short of the person treating the court with contempt, so I would like to see a long-term strategy for how to work with local authorities, particularly those with suitable buildings—council chambers or committee meetings rooms—that could be used for hearings in which there is no prospect of custody. That could be cases such as those who fail to pay for a TV licence. It would be far more sensible for those people not to make a long journey. The same argument might apply to cases that have been irritating to a local community but where there is no prospect of custody. Such cases would benefit from being heard in that community rather than being shipped away.

There is an allied discussion to be had about what we send to courts. I remember from my time in charge of finance at a local authority that council tax is one of the few debts that is still enforced through the threat of imprisonment. I accept that it is almost unheard of for someone to be committed to prison for not paying their council tax, but the collection of that tax still goes through a magistrates court whereas every other debt that might be owed to a local authority, apart from business rates, will be collected via the county court system. I remember that we had to have two teams, one pursuing someone for a debt they owed on our commercial refuse collection service, for example, and the other pursuing them through the magistrates court for the collection of business rates.

The situation is obviously different when people wilfully set out to defraud the system. When they put a lie on a form or claim that they live on their own when they do not, that is clearly a matter of fraud that should be dealt with in the criminal courts. I urge the Government, in reforming our court process, to consider what type of cases are ending up in magistrates courts, particularly as regards the enforcement of council tax, which might be better dealt with in a county courts setting. In Torquay, that would mean people going to Torquay county court rather than setting off to a magistrates court to have an argument about a debt that, fundamentally, they have been unable to pay.

There is a need to focus on a long-term plan. I know that the Public Accounts Committee will shortly produce a report following our examination of the National Audit Office report into value for money in the criminal justice service. We need to consider the plan for the long-term future of our courts and the strategy for ensuring that some cases can still be decided locally. We need a commitment to that, not just an allusion to it, and a firm plan for areas where there will no longer be courts and where there is no alternative building in the vicinity.

We must also consider the magistracy. The news that Torquay magistrates court would disappear prompted a number of people who have sat on the bench for a long time to consider whether they would wish to travel to Plymouth to hear the large number of cases that will take place there. I would also be concerned, as I mentioned in an intervention earlier, that we might rapidly find that our magistrates are all drawn from areas in which courts survive, rather than being people from across the area, able to reflect the impact on the communities concerned.

On a slightly related point, we must also consider how we call people for jury service. Although Crown court cases are not held in Torbay, if we are reducing the number of potential Crown court locations, we could also be restricting the areas from which we can sensibly draw jurors. We must ensure that we have a balance. The jury is meant to reflect the people as a whole, and although we cannot do that on every jury, people should have an equal chance of being called up for jury service. They should not find that because they happen to live close to the sole Crown court their chances are higher, whereas those who live some distance away are not likely to be called at all because of the practicalities. It would be interesting to consider that in a long-term plan for our Courts Service.

Although it is disappointing to reflect on the closure of Torquay magistrates court, I hope that some of my points about planning for the long term will be taken up to ensure that large amounts of money are not spent on courts months before their proposed closure, and to ensure that we consider what goes before our courts, not just where cases are heard.

1.54 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing the debate and echo the comments of many colleagues today, especially those made by the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen). This is a particularly significant issue for Wales and for my constituents in what is a largely rural constituency. I want to put on record that I am the co-chair of the justice unions and family courts parliamentary group.

Wales is witnessing a gradual yet steep decline in access to justice. Fifteen courts were closed across Wales during the 2010 to 2015 Parliament, and since the 2015 election a further 14 have either closed or are under discussion today. The closure of Dolgellau magistrates court in my constituency, for example, means that cases will need to be transferred to Caernarfon or Aberystwyth. The issue of inadequate public transport in Wales is well documented, but Members will understand that a journey from Dolgellau to Caernarfon or out of county to Aberystwyth is not simply a matter of waiting for the next bus to turn up. Of course, who would not be concerned at the prospect of defendants and witnesses travelling to court together on the same bus, possibly for a matter of hours? For my constituents in Dwyfor Meirionnydd and many people across Wales, it would become impossible to reach any magistrates court for a 9.30 am start. Closures will also have a severe impact on staff, who face either redundancy or significantly longer journeys to work. Consideration must be given in these circumstances to staff who have caring responsibilities, or to those who are disabled, for whom continued employment could well become untenable.

The Government defend themselves by claiming that courts are underused, but I have been told by credible sources that court cases are being moved to skew the figures and justify closing some courts. If the justification is not the lack of demand, it is the need to save money, which will effectively result in the cost of providing justice being passed from the state on to the individual engaging with the justice system, whether as an offender, a witness or a victim.

In fact, such a transfer of burden is a long-running strategy for the UK Government. Most notable and, arguably, most controversial are the restrictions on legal aid. When Sir Hartley Shawcross opened the Second Reading debate on the Legal Aid and Advice Bill in December 1948, he said that it would

“open the doors of the courts freely to all persons who may wish to avail themselves of British justice without regard to the question of their wealth or ability to pay.”—[*Official Report*, 15 December 1948; Vol. 459, c. 1221.]

Legal aid was meant to put an end to legal rights being luxuries beyond the reach of ordinary citizens. The UK Government’s restrictions roll back those important steps towards social justice. The new restrictions pass on the cost of justice from the state to the individual

and, unfortunately, that means that many people simply cannot afford to access justice, whether their court is within geographical reach or not.

The closure of courts in rural Wales will also have a profound impact on a person’s ability to conduct their business through the medium of Welsh. The consequence of court closures and the reduced availability of legal aid, including the reduction in legal aid contracts awarded to local solicitors, will continue the trend of small independent legal firms becoming unviable and subsequently being forced to relocate or close down altogether. In strong Welsh-speaking parts of Wales, that will make it impossible for residents to access legal services, obtain advice or legal counsel, or conduct their business in the language of their choice—which, I remind the House, is their right.

The Welsh language should be an essential consideration in deciding whether to close courts and I am pleased that the Government belatedly agreed to carry out their duty of completing a Welsh language impact assessment. However, Welsh speakers should not be forced to mount campaigns to ensure that these assessments, which the Government are legally required to carry out, are completed. I regret that it took so long for the Government to do that in this case, although I am glad that it has been done.

Returning to the issue of court access in rural areas, I have a background in teaching through video conferencing. I used to be the director in charge of teaching through video at Grwp Llandrillo Menai and we talked to a number of secondary schools throughout Wales. I have a particular interest, therefore, in efforts to increase access to justice through the use of technology, particularly video technology. Given the swathes of court closures and the particular problems they will cause in rural parts of Wales, allowing hearings to take place remotely might well be welcome.

Technology has great potential if its strengths and weaknesses are properly considered. I note, however, the eight conditions set out by Lord Leveson’s review of efficiency in criminal proceedings in January 2015. He considered those conditions to be prerequisites for remote hearings. The first seems obvious, but is in fact crucial: the equipment used and the audio and visual quality should be of a high standard. Given that the connectivity infrastructure in my constituency, along with that in vast swathes of rural Wales, is even poorer than the transport infrastructure, will the Minister outline what consideration is to be given to the quality and reliability of that infrastructure in those areas where courts are to be closed?

I hope especially that proper attention is given to Lord Leveson’s recommendation that a committee of criminal justice professionals be charged with identifying best practice for hearings conducted via video link, not only to maintain the gravitas of the court environment but, more importantly, to ensure that justice outcomes via communications technology are consistent with those in a conventional face-to-face environment. That is very important; one would be very concerned if the use of different means of communication produced inconsistency of results.

I recognise that there are general and serious concerns around the use of alternative buildings to ensure that access to justice is maintained, even if we may on occasion be able to use video technology. There are

[Liz Saville Roberts]

particular concerns about the Lord Chief Justice's suggestion that pubs and hotels could be used; proper consideration must be given to the nature of the issues being discussed and resolved. I am of the view that when concerns about suitability can be tackled, and if certain criteria can be met, the use of alternative public buildings should certainly be considered before the closure and removal of courts to distant locations. In the case of Dolgellau, the Meirionnydd council chamber would require little adaptation, and offers such facilities as parking and translation equipment. It is also nearer the police station, whose cells are used for court purposes when necessary, than the present grade II-listed court building. I strongly urge the Minister to consider that alternative as a physical court location, rather than leave my constituency, which covers 843 square miles and includes eight sizeable towns, with no court facilities whatever.

I remind the Minister that since 2010 the UK Government have already closed 15 courts across Wales, and a further 14 courts are now to close their doors. I urge the Minister to listen to what is said today, and to reconsider the proposal to close these further courts, especially if we can find alternative sites in those areas where public transport militates against defendants, witnesses and victims' travelling elsewhere with any sort of ease. I would strongly urge that alternative arrangements are made.

I will close by quoting Jeremy Bentham, who in 1795 said:

"The statesman who contributes to put justice out of reach... is an accessory after the fact to every crime".

2.2 pm

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to hold this important debate. We had a similar debate in September 2015, initiated by the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) and myself.

Hartlepool magistrates court and county court are scheduled for closure by the Government, which is why I wanted to raise the issue in September. That debate obviously fell on deaf ears, as Hartlepool remains scheduled for closure, as do 86 of the 91 magistrates courts that were identified. I mentioned in September that I had serious reservations about the proposals. Those reservations remain. My concerns are shared by the Law Society, which recommends that Hartlepool magistrates court and county court remain open.

There is nothing lacking in the facilities in Hartlepool. I understand that in other parts of the country magistrates courts have been earmarked for closure because they have failed to comply with the Equality Act 2010 or are lacking in security. Hartlepool has none of that. We have a prison video link, separate waiting facilities for prosecution and defence witnesses, and interview rooms. The consultation document itself concedes that if the proposed closure goes ahead, reconfiguration of the hearing space at Teesside magistrates court, which is where the magistrates would go, would be required; and I do not know how much that would cost.

That brings me to an additional point—that of the costs that will be saved by the proposal to close Hartlepool. I understand that the consultation is being driven primarily

by a desire to reduce costs. The Minister has said on many occasions that the courts estate costs around half a billion pounds a year, and that he wants to drive that down, but I question whether the closure of Hartlepool magistrates court will reduce costs at all.

There is a real lack of transparency on this matter. Hartlepool magistrates court and county court have operating costs of about £345,000 a year. The Minister has never been able to explain to me how savings will be made. I would imagine that a large proportion of those costs will be staff expenditure. Eight members of staff work at the magistrates court and seven full-time members work at Hartlepool county court. If there is going to be redundancy, which I imagine is the only way forward although it is still difficult to find out why, those are job losses that Hartlepool can ill afford.

It was announced last week that unemployment in Hartlepool increased in February, to 2,747 claimants. Although unemployment in the UK fell in the past year by 11%, the jobless rate in my constituency actually rose in the past 12 months, by 11.8%. Hartlepool is now the 11th worst-affected constituency in the entire country for unemployment. At a rate of 6.5%, it is over two and a half times the national rate. We simply cannot afford any more job losses, especially those that have been initiated by the Government.

Another reservation is about the building in which Hartlepool magistrates court and county court operate. It is not freehold. The Government cannot realise any value by selling off the building. The consultation document states that the Government want

"To maximise the capital receipts from surplus estate for reinvestment in HM Courts & Tribunals Service".

That aim will not be met by closing Hartlepool down. It is a leasehold property with a significant number of years still to run. The building is owned by Hartlepool Borough Council. I asked the Minister this before, and I have never received an answer so I will ask him again: how much will it cost to break the lease? Is the Minister considering whole-of-government efficiencies rather than taking a silo-based approach in terms of what he has to achieve for his individual Ministry? Does he not think that he is transferring financial pressures from his own Department on to hard-pressed local government?

I mentioned in the September debate that the criteria by which the courts would be closed seem opaque. On 9 September 2015 I tabled a parliamentary question about the cost-per-case across magistrates courts in England and Wales, including those in Hartlepool and Teesside. That seemed to me to be a reasonable metric with which to evaluate relative efficiencies across different operating units—it is what business does all the time. But the answer I received from the Minister stated:

"The information is not available centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost."

If that metric is not being used, what is? How can relative performance and effectiveness across the estate be evaluated in a consistent manner? I contend strongly that I do not think the closure of Hartlepool magistrates court will save the Government any money.

However, my central concern, which has been raised by several hon. Members throughout today's debate, is that my constituents will be inconvenienced in their access to local justice. The consultation document "Proposal

on the provision of court and tribunal services in the North East region” said of Hartlepool that, “there are excellent road, rail and bus links.”

The person who wrote that has never been to my part of the world. It is absolutely ludicrous to suggest that. Public transport in Teesside is appalling. Somebody from Hartlepool required to be at Teesside magistrates court for an early morning hearing and without access to a car would struggle to make it. The proportion of Hartlepool residents who have access to a car is 41%—more or less half the UK average of 81%. Victims, understandably, need a period of calm before having the stress of giving evidence, and they will be inconvenienced. I asked the Minister in September and I will ask him again: is this what the Government really want—to make justice and access to justice more stressful and inconvenient for innocent victims? Justice is not served by making victims travel longer distances.

The consultation document itself concedes that, at the present time, 99% of those accessing Hartlepool magistrates court can be there by public transport within 60 minutes. After the closure, scheduled to take place in January 2017, 91% will take between one and two hours. That fails directly the Government’s intention of ensuring that people would not have to face longer journeys, and it is one of the key reasons why the Law Society is opposed to the closures of the courts in Hartlepool.

Finally, I want to raise another point on Government policy, taking an holistic view of law and order and security. Police staff and officers at Cleveland police fell from 2,628 in March 2010 to 1,634 in September 2015—almost 38%. Total crime reported to Cleveland police in the past year has gone up by 22%, and in Hartlepool, offences of the type on which cases would be seen by the magistrates have risen sharply. Year on year, violence without injury has gone up by 46.7% in the Hartlepool area; non-domestic theft has risen by 10.9%, shoplifting by 19.5% and personal robbery has gone up in the past year by 63.6%.

That will put enormous strain on the whole judicial system. I ask the Minister again to reconsider the proposed closure of Hartlepool magistrates court, in keeping with the holistic view of good local law and order. Please think again. Please think about the representations made by me, my constituents and the Law Society, and ensure that Hartlepool magistrates court and county court can remain open.

2.10 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for her hard work in securing this important debate today.

Halifax is unusual in that two courts are closing in my constituency as part of the changes. Both Calderdale magistrates court and Halifax county court and family court, currently in two different buildings, will be closed and the majority of the workload transferred to Bradford. Anyone who has seen the recent BBC series “Happy Valley”, which is set in my constituency, may be forgiven for thinking that there is surely enough criminal activity in Halifax to keep two courts busy processing criminals around the clock, perhaps even with enough demand to open a Crown court, owing to the severity and frequency

of the criminal activity that takes place there. I am pleased and relieved to inform hon. Members that “Happy Valley”, albeit thoroughly gripping television, is not an accurate portrayal of law and order across Calderdale.

Back in the real world, and perhaps unlike other constituencies, we were prepared to work with the Government on the closure of one of our courts. We recognised that efficiency savings could be made, and in a move predominantly led by the local magistrates bench—I thank them for their detailed analysis and work on the proposals—we actively campaigned for a merging of the courts in a way that would deliver a cost saving to the Government while maintaining access to local justice. However, the announcement last month—delivered in a written statement, as a number of my colleagues have pointed out, on the last day before a recess—that both courts would close revealed that the Government’s ambition for savings would not accommodate this proposal.

Like most MPs, fighting injustice is largely what motivates me to do this job, and I would argue that British values and our standing in the world are entwined with our fair and accessible justice system, which has paved the way for so many others around the world. We never know when we might be a victim of crime or witness a crime. We live in hope that we never have a family breakdown so serious that we require guidance from the family courts. Injustice takes many forms and the two courts in my patch play an essential role, not only in righting wrongs, but in resolving all manner of often difficult and sensitive disputes.

The arguments about access to justice and the merits of this have been well rehearsed over the course of the consultation and throughout the debate, so I will focus on challenges to the Government, which I hope the Minister will recognise in his winding-up remarks. The closure of 86 courts and tribunals has been packaged not as closures at all but as a means of facilitating a justice revolution, driven by technology that will make justice more accessible than ever before.

The Government have committed to spend £700 million over five years to modernise and fully digitise the courts. However, a written question to the Minister tabled on 7 December and answered on 29 February revealed that £1.35 million was spent on delivering the digitisation programme in courts whose closure has subsequently been announced. Although the response outlined that the vast majority of this expenditure was in reusable hardware assets which could be reallocated to other sites, representatives from the courts in Halifax tell me that thousands of pounds will have been wasted in costs associated with the installation and custom cabling in buildings soon to be closed. Is the £700 million figure quoted a new fund that will mitigate the access gap created by the court closures, or does this figure include moneys already spent as part of the digitisation programme in courts that we now know will be closed?

To echo the sentiments expressed in the Chamber, I was grateful for the opportunity to meet the Minister in person to present the case for merging the courts, and I know that he met separately representatives from the magistrates bench in Calderdale. It was not clear to me what services the Government would provide in the roll-out of this technological revolution in justice, and

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what responsibilities might fall to local authorities and even law firms working privately to bridge the access gap.

Our local authorities are cash-strapped, particularly in Calderdale where the devastating Boxing day floods, combined with other pressures, have placed an unprecedented burden on the budget, and I would be concerned if the Government were expecting local authorities to play a role in part-financing some of the changes that might be required. I would be even more concerned if the Government were expecting the private sector to step in and introduce the technology required to mitigate the closure of the courts, in a way which will inevitably introduce a postcode lottery to accessing justice. We have heard from colleagues about challenges linked to mobile coverage and broadband cover, which would inevitably contribute to the postcode lottery. I would be grateful if the Minister could clarify what role he expects local authorities and the private sector to play in the digitisation process.

I want to outline the impact that the closures will have on the local economy, as other Members have identified. The two courts in Halifax are located at the top end of the town centre and are surrounded by a number of law firms in what could be described as the legal quarter. Like Wakefield, we have a post office due for closure in the same part of town. Back in October, I sent a letter to the Secretary of State signed by 13 representatives of law firms which, by no coincidence, are situated in close proximity to the courts. Those law firms, paying rates, employing highly educated professionals and paying good wages in my constituency, are now considering their futures in Halifax. Several are considering following the workload to Bradford and although I accept that there will still be clients in Halifax, will there be enough to keep all those jobs there? I reiterate once more that there is not as much work for lawyers in Halifax as “Happy Valley” might suggest.

With the court buildings empty, the potential for a number of surrounding offices to be empty as a result would not be at all healthy for that area of the town centre and would place quite a burden on the local authority in terms of regeneration. Ultimately, like many of my colleagues across the Chamber, I am worried about how this will impact on those who are regular attenders at the courts. Far from those being exclusively repeat offenders, staff from social housing provider Pennine and representatives of the local authority—Calderdale council, Calderdale women’s centre, police officers and youth offending services—are just some of the predominantly public services and charity organisations which stand to be inconvenienced by the closures. Let us be clear. When I say “inconvenienced”, that means extended journey times, and therefore more costly journeys, and potentially extended periods out of the office dealing with court appearances or formalities. Inconvenience is a cost, and when we are dealing with public services, it is a cost ultimately picked up by the taxpayer.

I am looking for assurances from the Minister that the justice revolution is real and deliverable in the appropriate timeframe, and that the funding is available. I am looking for clarity on what wastage there has already been in delivering the digitisation programme. I want to know that consideration will be given to assisting

local authorities in managing the closure of the courts and any resulting impact that this will have on town centres and on the businesses that relies on their proximity to the courts. Finally, I seek an assurance that the Department for Justice is genuinely delivering a cost saving to the taxpayer with these closures, not just a saving to the Department—that it has not just passed some of the cost to local authorities, some to the Home Office and some to social housing providers and charities, and that the Department’s ambition to achieve savings has not compromised what is sensible and practical in our world-renowned justice system.

2.18 pm

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for providing time for this debate. In particular, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing it and opening the debate so skilfully and eloquently. We share a concern about Lambeth county court, which covers many of our constituents.

The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) spoke about how busy his court was in Bromley, and showed how busy he was by receiving a call here. Lambeth court, too, is busy. When I appeared at the court—as a witness, I hasten to add—to speak for leaseholders against Southwark council, that morning alone there were about 22 individual cases involving residents and the council. It is an incredibly busy court, which is why local legal professionals approached me and other Members about the Government’s assessment of how the court was being used. Their concerns related to both the time that that assessment took place and the consideration of preparation for cases.

When this topic was discussed in Westminster Hall, these issues were not answered fully. It would be useful if the Minister could confirm whether alternative facilities have the capacity to provide the necessary preparation time and space. It is deeply unfortunate that in a debate about justice, the Government have not provided sufficient evidence to justify their course of action.

One aspect that has not been discussed today concerns law students. London South Bank University approached me to ask whether the Government are even considering assessing the impact on law students, the additional costs they will incur and the additional travel they will have to undertake to attend cases. Can the Minister tell us whether such an assessment will be conducted?

The issue of travel has been raised many times. The Government figure showing that 97% of people affected can be at a different court within an hour has been significantly challenged by Resolution and by Members today. That figure is not for travel from home, and it would be much more useful if the Government could provide an assessment of average journey times from home to court. I hope the Minister will commit today to provide such an assessment.

The 97% figure is also undermined in communities such as mine. In the borough of Southwark, only 50% of households actually own a car. The policy of controlled parking zones also affects many residents. People are therefore either unable to own a car or have only limited access to one.

In looking at the issue on behalf of individual constituents, I looked at journey times for constituents in Rotherhithe. It would take some of them four hours to go from Rotherhithe to Putney if they needed to appear there, and that would include six different bus journeys. I hope we have a new Mayor in May who will freeze fares and introduce the one-hour ticket, but my constituents still face potentially higher costs. Those costs and the inconvenience involved in travelling will affect court attendance, and they could affect the number of cancelled cases and appeals. We have not seen a full assessment of those issues.

Nor have we seen a full assessment of the potential knock-on costs for the police, who are transporting witnesses further, or to the probation service and the Prison Service, which are transporting defendants further. I believe it was the Law Society that raised the case of jurors claiming higher costs for their car use and the cost of public transport. Assessments of those issues have not been made available to the level we would expect. We have also heard about the additional costs to councils' housing and social services offices.

Instead of the Department providing the evidence base and undertaking assessments, huge assumptions have been made about the willingness of councils and police stations to make space available to provide the video link facilities that the Minister has mentioned previously. Where is the evidence base to show that those things will happen and that the equipment will be available and useable? My hon. Friends the Members for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) and for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) talked about rural access to broadband services, but the issue is equally relevant to Rotherhithe, where BT has not provided the capacity to meet local demand. It would be useful if the Government could indicate today that they will look at that issue.

Without the demonstrable capacity to deliver the justice we know is needed, it seems that the Ministry of Justice is rushing into these proposals and passing the buck to other parts of the public sector and to individuals—individuals who have experienced crime or misfortune, and who are now being served another layer of injustice.

I am certainly not opposed to the modernisation agenda, but without the full assessments and commitments I have outlined, it is a very risky agenda. It is vital that the Government provide those assessments before they push ahead with their agenda.

2.22 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): May I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing the debate? The general tone has been that no one is opposed to change, and that is where I start from. Like any other public service, the justice system and the magistrates system need to change. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) said, the root cause of the proposals, whether we like it or not, is the attempt to save money and the small-state conservatism that the Chancellor of the Exchequer longs for. That has made the system throw up some very peculiar examples of injustice. We also have ludicrous situations such as the one the hon. Member for Torbay

(Kevin Foster) mentioned, where substantial investment was made in a magistrates court a year or so ago, only for it to be written off now.

The hon. Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) said the consultation was clearly flawed, and I agree. The assumption that was made was clearly that these courts would close and that people could travel to the courts that remained open. What was not taken into consideration was the people who do not have access to cars. In my constituency, people use the magistrates court in Consett, and they were told in the public consultation that took place in the north-east that if they had to travel to Peterlee court—as they will now have to—they could go by train. Well, that would be a very circuitous route, seeing as there is no train station in Peterlee. Even if someone took another form of public transport, they would have to set off at something like 7 o'clock in the morning to get there by 9.30, and that depends on public transport being available. That also fails to recognise the rural nature of my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass). That has been the main flaw in the proposals.

Having spoken to the Minister, I recognise that he is committed to change, although he has a sword hanging over his head in terms of cutting costs. Like the hon. Member for High Peak, I made representations to the Minister—about the proposals for North Durham. My constituents will now have to travel to Peterlee magistrates court, which will take them more than two hours on public transport, if it is possible to use it. The constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham will find things even more difficult. I suggested to the Minister that it would make more sense for my constituents to travel to Newcastle or Gateshead—it would certainly be a lot quicker to get from Chester-le-Street, in my constituency, for example, to Gateshead or Newcastle magistrates court. I am also told by the local head of the Crown Prosecution Service that there is spare capacity in those two courts.

I wrote to the Minister on 25 February, and I was very disappointed this morning when I got his letter, which said that my proposal was not possible and that my constituents would still have to travel to Peterlee. That makes no sense whatever, when people can get from Chester-le-Street to Newcastle in 10 minutes on the train, as opposed to the nearly two hours it takes to get to Peterlee. I would therefore ask the Minister to look again at those proposals. I accept that the problem people have is that they will have to cross county boundaries, but my proposals will make things a lot easier for many of my constituents.

A number of Members have raised the fundamental problem with the cost-driven nature of the proposals. Access to justice is a serious issue for the magistrates service and for the dedicated individuals who give up their time to serve as magistrates. Justice is supposed to be dispensed locally, but that will not be the case in future, when people will have to travel long distances.

As I say, I am not opposed to new technology; indeed, having spent quite a lot of time recently in court—I have been doing a fellowship with the Industry and Parliament Trust—I have spoken to the professionals, and they are not opposed to change. However, one thing they keep telling me is that there is a shortage of cash in the system. If we are going to achieve the

[*Mr Kevan Jones*]

situation I think the Minister wants to, with local video conferencing and other buildings being used, some up-front money will have to be put into the system. Otherwise, we will just settle into a situation where the cuts have been made and we keep the courts we still have—and that will be it. That would be a mistake, because in terms of dispensing local justice—the hon. Member for Torbay raised this point and it is a good one—we need to look at what goes to magistrates courts. If we are talking simply about non-violent offences and people not being sentenced to prison, their cases can be dealt with in other settings, but the cash has to be there.

My experience of visiting the Courts Service throughout the country over the last few weeks as part of my fellowship with the Industry and Parliament Trust has been that there is not the cash up front to do what would make sense to support the professionals and, more importantly, our constituents. Constituents will want access to justice not only if they have to go before a court, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield rightly argued—this is sometimes forgotten in the system—if they are a victim. They need to be able to see that justice is being done, and if obstacles are put in their way, such as those relating to access to travel to a magistrates court, that will be a problem for them.

I ask the Minister to take a step back before making any commitments. If he is going to implement the other proposals, which I think he genuinely wants to do, there needs to be a timetable. Will he look again at the proposals for North Durham? It makes no sense whatsoever for people to have to travel for two hours to Peterlee to access justice, when they can travel to Newcastle in 10 minutes. I do not think that the people who drew up this consultation looked at the local geography, and I think they assumed that everyone had access to a car. Not everyone in my rural constituency has access to a car, and public transport is intermittent. If that puts an obstacle in the way of them getting justice, I have to say that, in a modern and rich society such as ours, that is a scandal.

2.30 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): May I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) for bringing this important matter before the House? I also thank every other Member who has spoken today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) spoke passionately about the closure of the magistrates and civil courts in Bridgend after thousands of pounds had been spent recently on the building. My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) spoke of the Government's many U-turns on justice policies, including the scrapping of two-tier contracts, costing the Ministry of Justice more than £400,000.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) told the House that the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara) is a black belt in martial arts. I am a fourth dan black belt in judo, but that is a story for another day.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) spoke of the very good facilities in magistrates courts and that their closure will not save money. My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) spoke of the massive impact on her constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) noted that the consultation mentioned travel by train but that there is no train station in Peterlee. My hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) raised an issue that has not been raised before, namely the impact of court closures on law students.

The hon. Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) spoke about the closures in his area. The Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), brought his vast experience to the debate, and his mobile phone made an intervention at a crucial time. The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) was disappointed about the closure of his local magistrates court and said that we needed a long-term plan. The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (William Wragg) spoke of his campaign to keep the Stockport court open. There have also been many excellent interventions.

Everyone who has spoken has set out comprehensively and eloquently the issues at stake and the importance of access to local justice. Labour absolutely recognises that savings have to be made in these difficult economic times. Only this week, we heard the Chancellor say how he has failed to meet his own economic targets, which he set, and that further savings therefore needed to be found. We disagree profoundly, however, as to how those savings should and could be made, and we vehemently argue that across-the-board cuts to vital local services are unfair and, indeed, unjust.

The latest court closures, which affect a fifth of the court estate, come on top of ongoing cuts in the sector. If they are not implemented fairly, they will lead increasingly to the creation of a two-tier justice system and seriously hamper access to justice, particularly for the most vulnerable in our society.

The current proposals are based on a flawed consultation process, and a flawed process begets flawed results. Indeed, the Minister apologised for those many errors. However, that does call into question the basis for the 86 listed courts that are currently being considered for closure.

The announcement on those potential closures was made on the last day before the February recess, making today's debate all the more important in order to ensure proper parliamentary scrutiny. One of the criteria for the court closures consultation was court utilisation, which on the face of it seems a reasonable criterion. However, we must also bear in mind that fewer hearings are taking place because of broader cuts in this sector; cuts to legal aid and increased court fees mean that fewer people have recourse to justice, which is not the right result. There is also a shortage of staff and judges. Since 2010, the Courts and Tribunals Service has been cut by 5,000 staff, and it is set to lose a further 5,000 to 6,000 by 2020.

The Public and Commercial Services Union, whose members include those working in Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service, the Crown Prosecution Service and the private sector delivered guard service, has stated:

“High utilisation rates can only be achieved by listing several lengthy contested matters in the same court on the basis that they will not all be effective. If all the hearings are effective and one or more cases have to be delayed it adds distress and inconvenience for the parties and witnesses involved.

Lack of available court time for listing cases, often due to a shortage of staff, causes cases to be adjourned for long periods. Many courts already struggle to list family multi-day cases due to both lack of court rooms and lack of staff. This often means cancelling trial courts. A reduction in the available court rooms will lead to further delay.”

The PCS report on the court closures consultation finds that the figures used overestimate the maximum amount of time for which the court can be used. For example, it notes that, according to Government assessments, North Avon magistrates court has a maximum utilisation of 1,240 days, whereas staff working there put the figure at 992 days.

In many instances, as hon. Members have said today, the travel times resulting from many of the court closures will cause unacceptable inconvenience for their constituents. The Government contend that most people will still be able to reach court within a one-hour car journey. It has been said on a number of occasions, most recently by the Law Society, that the methodology used to calculate travel times was not transparent or independently verified. The travel times given in the consultation paper represent the “best case scenario”.

I know from my own experience that, since Neath magistrates court closed in May 2014, my constituents have had to travel to Swansea, denying them access to local justice in their own community. Constituents, magistrates and local solicitors working in the area suggest that the closure of the local court has had a negative impact locally. Several areas of my constituency are far removed from the courts that they are now expected to use in Swansea. Public transport options are severely limited and operate infrequently. Their travel times far exceed the so-called one-hour travel time limit, and it is possible that opposing sides, victims, witnesses and perpetrators, will sit on the same bus or train.

The Neath civil and family court is on the list of proposed closures. That will mean that my constituents will have to travel to Port Talbot, joining people who will have been moved from the Bridgend civil and family court, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend mentioned. I have visited the court in Port Talbot and question whether that centre can bear the increased workflow and whether the facilities will be sufficient for their purposes. Moreover, the journey from Glynneath to Port Talbot takes one hour and 35 minutes, with one bus change, and that from Banwen to Port Talbot takes one hour and 44 minutes, with a change of bus and added walking time on either side, without allowing for heavy traffic problems.

Those on low incomes often have to choose between buying necessities or the cost of travel to court, causing hardship at what is already a stressful time. The closures have caused great inconvenience to many people in Neath who may find themselves victims of spurious allegations or charged unnecessarily. Victims of domestic abuse, for example, will have to travel further to seek emergency protection at a critical time, when any delays could lead directly to further and serious harm.

In addition to affecting those of our constituents who are forced to travel further afield, the closures will mean redundancies and lost jobs, and I know that, in many constituencies such as mine across the UK, every

job is much needed. Even if jobs are retained, the additional travelling times will mean higher costs for staff to travel to work. It will have a particular impact on staff with caring responsibilities and staff with disabilities. The consultation did not adequately address that aspect of the closures.

The court closures will have broader implications. In Neath, now that the magistrates court is closed, the police are forced to travel all the way to Swansea to get warrants, which uses up valuable time that could be spent on the beat. I am sure that that is the case in many other areas, and those issues should be addressed in the light of future closures. I have spoken to many who work in and alongside our justice system, and I hear time and again of a perfect storm of pressure on our courts and tribunal system.

An increase in litigants in person means more time and follow-up work for the courts. At the same time, cuts have been made to the number of administrators and clerks in the Court Service. Now we are looking at a raft of court closures. The consequences are frustrating for users and for those who work in the courts. Increased waiting time outside courts and uncertainty about when cases will be heard are particularly problematic for those who are reliant on public transport, for parties who are distressed—that includes vulnerable people—and for those who have young children waiting with them.

Lack of availability of court time leads to delays in proceedings. For example, at Edmonton county court, a transfer of tenancy application in a domestic abuse and financial remedies case, which should normally last half a day, waited seven and a half months for listing for the final hearing. With larger volumes of cases at fewer court centres, the buildings come under pressure. It is not unusual for advocates to have to discuss highly confidential and sometimes highly distressing matters sitting on the floor of a corridor or in a stairwell because conference rooms are full. Let us not forget the impact on jurors, who were not included in the list of affected groups in the impact assessment.

On many occasions in this House, we have heard how the wonders of technology will transform the judicial service and make the need for proximity to court buildings a thing of the past. I am not one to stand in the way of progress, but we simply have not had, to date, a sufficient—or indeed any—explanation of how a judicial system fit for the 21st century and beyond will function. We have simply been told by the Minister about the use of video conferencing. It is quite possible that the most vulnerable in society, who are most in need of support—those who do not own a car and are reliant on public transport to travel to court—do not have reliable, secure and private internet access. Many of my constituents in Neath, like those of so many of the hon. Members we have heard from today, simply do not own a computer or smartphone. They have no internet access at home, and our local libraries seem to be closing because of local authority cuts. We need a real explanation of how that practice will work. How will vulnerable victims and witnesses be kept safe and secure during online or remote proceedings? Giving evidence can be a traumatic experience, and proper support needs to be considered. We are also due a proper explanation of the costs involved.

I recently met staff from the personal support unit, who provide advice and guidance for court users and help to translate the specific language and procedures in

[Christina Rees]

the court service into lay terms. Staff at the unit said that it is far more about in-person support, compassion and sympathy. At a difficult time when they feel vulnerable, victims and accused need reassurance and guidance most of all, and those cannot be provided via teleconference.

The Government's case for the closures is underpinned by untested digital processes. According to the PCS union, the national roll-out of several digital products has been delayed because they were not fit for purpose.

Valerie Vaz: Does my hon. Friend agree that the IT system is a failure? How could the Minister possibly assert that it is a good replacement for the reductions in the court estate?

Christina Rees: My hon. Friend makes an important point.

I want to refer to the e-form that was used to calculate individuals' financial assets in divorce cases. A fault in that online form caused a lot of trouble. It was corrected by the Minister, but e-forms were involved in almost 36,000 cases during the affected period. The Minister regretted the error and said that application to vary or set aside would not attract fees, but those involved would not be able to access legal advice on those complex issues through legal aid.

The client and cost management system is due to come into compulsory use from 1 April 2016. Over the past two weeks Resolution, the family law group, said that many legal aid firms cannot access the system, or that they get thrown out when they submit the form. The system is not fit for purpose, and its introduction should be delayed.

An online court has been proposed for claims of up to £25,000. Individuals would have no access to legal advice for such claims, even though they might be up against big organisations with their own legal teams. That would be a major disadvantage. The proposal needs to be rigorously tested, piloted and evaluated.

What happens in the event of technological failures or unreliable technology? Those would, undoubtedly, further delay proceedings rather than expediting them, which would add to the stress of victims and witnesses. The Law Society acknowledges the aim of increasing the use of technology, but it recommended during the consultation process that it would be prudent to modernise courts with new technology, assess how that is working and then consider savings, rather than the other way around. I wholeheartedly agree.

I welcome the Government's desire to harness technology positively and efficiently, but we need to hear much more about the plans. Surely, the systems should be tested and piloted before many of the slated closures go ahead. Perhaps the Minister will take the opportunity to explain in more detail what his thinking is and how the system will work for those who wish or need to access justice. Once again, I must stress that it should not, and cannot, lead to the creation of haves and have-nots.

Finally, I wish to highlight the last round of closures and talk about the use of buildings after the closures. Many of the courts that are slated to close, or were recently closed, have better facilities than the alternatives

that people will be forced to travel to. I have raised questions about the proceeds of sale of those buildings, and about the ongoing costs of their maintenance and upkeep in the event that they are not sold or used for other community purposes. Such buildings tend to be prominently and conveniently located in town centres. If they are left to fall into rack and ruin, they can have a negative effect on a town centre.

The Ministry of Justice is still paying to secure and maintain 15 of the courts that were closed in 2010, and they are costing the taxpayer more than £40,000 a month to secure and maintain. The most expensive upkeep is for the former magistrates court in Alton, which costs almost £10,000 a month. The facilities that existed in Alton have not been replicated at the court that received the work. In some instances, the buildings are not suitable for any use other than as a court.

In conclusion, it is an unavoidable fact that savings in the court system need to be identified, as colleagues have said. One of the central tenets of our common law system is the local delivery of local justice, with access to justice for all. Any court closures must absolutely minimise the negative impact on access to justice for all our citizens.

2.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Shailesh Vara): I congratulate the hon. Members for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on giving colleagues the opportunity to debate this very important issue one more time. I thank all hon. Members who have spoken. I will try to mention them as best I can in the few minutes available. May I also take this opportunity to welcome the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) on her first outing at the Dispatch Box? I look forward to debating with her in the weeks and months ahead.

I am keenly aware that hon. Members hold strong views about the importance of courts in their constituencies and about the impact that their closure may have on the delivery of justice. That has been made abundantly clear today, as it has in numerous parliamentary debates and questions, as well as at the many meetings I have had with hon. Members and in the correspondence—I have written letters to them in response—in which they have engaged.

I very much understand the sincerity of those concerns. I hope that hon. Members will appreciate that the decision to close a court is not one that I take lightly, but it is a decision that I am prepared to make when it is necessary to do so to support essential reform of our courts and tribunals system and to bring it up to modern-day standards. We need to create a modern and flexible Courts and Tribunals Service that is fit for the 21st century.

Court staff and the judiciary work hard, but they face challenges in delivering an efficient service when the infrastructure that supports the administration of the courts and tribunals is inefficient and disjointed. Some of the technology that supports services is decades old, and few of the services we offer can be accessed online. We continue to use paper forms, and when court users need to make a payment, we often accept only cash or cheques. We need urgently to modernise

the way the courts and tribunals operate to reduce inefficiencies, and to open up new ways for the public to access justice.

The Government are supporting this reform with very significant investment. Investment of £700 million over the next four years will transform the experience of everyone who comes into contact with courts and tribunals. We will provide new services and deliver better, more joined-up ways of working across the justice system. These reforms will increase access to justice by making it swifter, easier to use and more efficient.

I appreciate that some hon. Members have concerns about the consultation exercise we conducted. I have apologised at the Dispatch Box for errors that have occurred in some of the individual courts concerned. However, I assure the House that, although there have been some inaccuracies, the final decisions were taken on the basis of correct information and after consideration of all the well over 2,100 submissions that were made.

Mr Andrew Tyrrie (Chichester) (Con): I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way, particularly as I was unable, owing to other parliamentary business, to be in the Chamber for much of the debate, for which I apologise. I do not like having to intervene in this way on so kindly a Minister. Frankly, however, the closures, particularly for Chichester, are not a policy, but a negation of a policy. Everyone understands the need for financial stringency, but no economic rationale for these closures has been provided, despite repeated requests. Until such a rationale is provided, people will continue to be deeply concerned about the closures. Chichester's court use is above the national average, and the travel times analysis is seriously flawed. Is the Minister now prepared at least to reconsider the closures, for which no economic case at all has been provided?

Mr Vara: I hope that I will get some injury time in view of that intervention, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): In view of that speech, you may have some injury time.

Mr Vara: I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

My right hon. Friend speaks with passion. He and I have corresponded much, and we have met on many occasions. In fact, it is fair to say that I dreaded entering the Tea Room when I knew he was there, because I knew he would come and speak to me about his court. I think he will agree that I have tried to give him the best information I can, but on the final conclusion he wants, we will have to agree to disagree.

The Government have listened carefully, which is why, in addition to the five court buildings we have retained, we have modified our initial plans for a further 22 sites. The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood will be mindful of that, because the court work that was initially going to be transferred to a court at Wandsworth, 6 miles away from Lambeth, will now be transferred to one at Camberwell Green, just 2 miles away. That was a consequence of our meeting and engagement with the local community.

In eight of the 22 sites where changes have been made, we will not close the court until suitable local alternative provision is in place. Work is under way to determine the specific provision to be provided at each

of those locations, and to evaluate a number of options for holding hearings away from traditional court buildings. I expect further testing to take place over the coming months.

Neil Coyle: Will the Minister clarify whether what he has just said is accurate? He seems to indicate that all the cases that were to be heard in Putney instead of Lambeth county court will now be held in Camberwell, but that is not the impression delivered previously. How much of the £700 million budget being made available will go to police or council facilities to ensure that a video link is possible?

Mr Vara: This four-year reform programme is worth more than £700 million, and the intention is to ensure that we have one of the best justice systems in the world. I will not give the hon. Gentleman details now about the precise minutiae and breakdown of a four-year programme involving so much money.

Neil Coyle: You do not know it.

Mr Vara: The hon. Gentleman chunters away from a sedentary position, but if he had a little experience of business, he would know that in a four-year programme with such a huge sum of money involved, the figures might not be as precise as he would like them to be at the initial stage.

An important aspect of testing and evaluation will be to ensure that any hearings held outside a traditional court offer appropriate levels of security for members of the public, the judiciary, and court staff. Travel time was mentioned by a number of people, and there must be a fundamental recognition that far fewer people will have to travel to courts in the first place. We intend to use modern technology, and video conferencing facilities are already available. The hon. Member for Neath asked whether those have been tested in any way, but we already have such facilities—for example, there is a community centre in Wales that is used to give evidence.

We already have alternative places to use as courts, and employment tribunal cases have been conducted on oil rigs in the North sea. Only yesterday, a lawyer colleague of ours who joined the House after the election last year told me about probation cases that she had been involved in that were held in public houses.

Mr Kevan Jones: I note what the Minister is saying about new technology and I do not disagree with him, but will he look again at my North Durham constituency, because it is nonsense when people can travel to Gateshead or Newcastle in 10 or 15 minutes, as opposed to travelling to Peterlee? I have raised the issue previously with the Minister and asked him to reconsider, because it makes no sense whatsoever.

Mr Vara: There comes a point when we have to start taking decisions and agree to disagree. This whole programme started before last year's summer recess, and we had a lengthy consultation period. I have had numerous debates and met more people in the House than I can remember. There has been a huge dialogue, but there must be some recognition that we have listened and made changes in a huge number of cases. That may not be the case in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, but I am afraid we must agree to disagree.

[Mr Vara]

My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) raised concerns about the effectiveness of the administration process that will see this programme through. I will be keeping a sharp eye on proceedings, and if he has any concerns about his local area, I will be more than happy to try to arrange a meeting with senior people at local level, so that he has the comfort he wants.

The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) spoke of the wonderful work that magistrates do in our courts. I can only echo those comments and say that many magistrates recognise the need for reform.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) spoke about the very useful work of the Justice Committee and brought his own expertise to the House. He also questioned the reliability of the IT projects we will be undertaking. I emphasise that we are taking a staged approach. We will not be putting all our eggs in one basket and we are bringing in expert advice from outside to assist us.

Robert Neill: Will the Minister also deal with the question I raised about what happened to the 10 courts closed under the previous programme that remain unsold? If he does not have that information to hand today, will he at least write and place it in the Library?

Mr Vara: What I can say is that the 10 has now been reduced to nine, and there are offers in place for some of the remaining courts. Others have had genuine difficulties because of joint occupation with other parties. We hope to transfer the remaining courts to the Homes and Communities Agency, which is dealt with by the Department for Communities and Local Government.

The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) spoke about her personal experience. I was sorry, as I am sure were other colleagues, to hear about the assault that had taken place on her. I very much take on board the points she makes about domestic violence. I emphasise that we are improving the system by which witnesses and victims give evidence. At the moment, they have to go to court and go through a terrifying experience. With a video conferencing facility, they can go to a place that is closer to their home and in much more pleasant surroundings, rather than the awesome and austere environment of a court.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (William Wragg) for his comments confirming that this has been a genuine consultation. The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) made a very powerful speech, raising an important point about digital infrastructure. I take on board what he says. We will certainly be making sure that the infrastructure is in place to support the court reform programme.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) spoke about low-level offences, such as TV licence offences. He sought assurances that perhaps they could be dealt with in courts that are closer to the area. Our thinking is that such low-level offences can probably be dealt with online where people plead guilty, which is the majority of cases.

The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd gave a very powerful speech, raising concerns about access to justice. I assure her that we are very mindful of rural

areas and want to make sure we get this right. My constituency has a rural element to it, so I know where she is coming from.

Liz Saville Roberts: The Minister mentioned alternative arrangements for eight courts. Can he provide more detail on that?

Mr Vara: The hon. Lady will forgive me if I do not provide detail on the provisions for eight separate courts at the Dispatch Box now, as time is pressing. I am happy to write to her later in more detail and I will certainly do that.

The hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), a very good friend of mine, made a passionate speech. He wanted an assurance that justice would not become more stressful. As I said in relation to the comments made by the hon. Member for Wakefield, we hope the experience will be a lot better for people. We hope they will not have to travel as far and that modern technology will assist them in giving evidence in a closer and more convenient location.

The hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) made a heartfelt speech, in which she referred to technology. I assure her we will deal with the £700 million in a very careful way and make sure we get it right.

The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) raised concerns, in particular in relation to his local court. He has been passionate in defending his local court, but the consultation received only three responses about it from his local community. I give him credit for wanting to keep the court open, but the fact that there were three responses speaks for itself. I am pleased that the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) welcomed the need for reform, and I take on board what he said, but we will have to agree to disagree, as I said.

In conclusion, I thank all hon. Members, particularly the two who secured this debate. This is a major undertaking by the MOJ, and we will do our best to ensure we have a fit-for-purpose justice system. Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish you, hon. Members, the Clerks and, most importantly, all the people who ensure that this place continues to operate, especially the security services, a happy Easter.

3.5 pm

Helen Hayes: I thank every Member who has contributed to this debate. The level of concern about the decision to close 86 courts and tribunals is clear.

We have heard from across the Chamber concerns about the physical accessibility of courts as a consequence of the closures and about serious problems with the assumptions about the use of digital technology, especially in areas with poor broadband. Several hon. Members spoke about sensible and creative alternative proposals that were more responsive to local geography and demographics but which were rejected. We also heard about the overreliance on travel by private car and the flawed travel-time data underpinning the decision and about the interrelationship with other public sector cuts. How can police stations provide video links, when in my area so many have closed that the remaining ones are bursting at the seams? We have heard about many hidden impacts from the decision, including on the micro-economy of town and city centres.

I brought this debate before the House because I was concerned that the decision to close 86 courts and tribunals without a coherent, joined-up plan for ensuring access to justice would impact most on the most vulnerable victims, witnesses and defendants, would bring additional costs to several other areas of the public sector and would have a serious impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of our justice system. I am grateful to the Minister for his response, but I urge him to rethink these proposals and come back to the House with a comprehensive plan that addresses the many concerns raised.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House acknowledges the need for some underused courts and tribunals to close; notes the detrimental effect that too many court closures will have on access to justice for vulnerable families and individuals particularly in rural areas where public transport is less reliable; further notes with concern the effect these closures will have on the experienced and dedicated staff working in the 86 courts and tribunals; and calls on the Government to acknowledge the concerns of staff, magistrates and third sector organisations who highlighted numerous flaws in the consultation document, to think again on some of these closures and acknowledge the importance of access to local justice.

Easter Adjournment

3.7 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

I am introducing this debate on behalf of the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, who sends his apologies; he has been called away on urgent constituency business.

First, may I put on the record the sad death today of Johan Cruyff, one of the most brilliant footballers I have had the pleasure of watching and one who will be ever remembered for the Cruyff turn?

This is the time of the festival of Purim, which, as Jewish Members will know, commemorates the delivery of the Jewish people from the Persian Haman, who attempted the first genocide against the Jews but failed. This week was also the anniversary of Hitler's rise to power in Germany, where he inflicted the holocaust on the Jewish population and the world. We will forever remember those evil atrocities in Germany.

On a brighter note, today is the second day of the festival of Holi, the festival of colours, when we commemorate Lord Krishna dancing, playing and throwing colours around, and the delivery of Prahlad from the fire and from his wicked aunt Holika. I wish Hindus, Sikhs and Jains everywhere a very happy Holi. If I may, I will recite the key words spoken during Holi: "Bura na mano".

I will now talk about some of the issues I want to raise in the debate. The Government have done a lot of work, but there is much more to do. Locally, I come back to the absolute requirement for a lift to be installed at Stanmore station. I hope that the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who is a Stanmore resident, will concur on this desperate need. This has been going on for more than 10 years. Residents face the north face of the Eiger when they arrive home at Stanmore station in having to climb 39 steep steps—*[Interruption.]* Yes, it is the "Thirty Nine Steps"! Transport for London calls this step-free access. This has been going on ever since the former Mayor of London deleted the lift from the budget. I trust that whoever is elected Mayor of London on 5 May will deliver for us a lift at Stanmore, which is desperately needed.

Equally, Stanmore faces another challenge in that Hertfordshire County Council wishes to cancel its subsidy for the 142 and 207 bus routes, yet these services are a key requirement for people travelling between Watford, Brent Cross and elsewhere. I trust that Hertfordshire County Council will see the justice of allowing a subsidy to enable its residents to travel to these areas, which is vital. Without that, key bus services to Watford will be dramatically reduced.

In the Budget we heard the welcome announcement that Crossrail 2 is getting the go-ahead. I trust that Crossrail 2 will listen to the key business case that we have put for an extension to Harrow and Wealdstone station as part of the massive Crossrail 2 redevelopment, which is welcomed across London.

I shall continue to agitate on the redevelopment of the Royal National Orthopaedic hospital in Stanmore. This is a brilliant hospital whose medical professionals perform such brilliant work in ridiculously and outrageously bad conditions.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Does my hon. Friend know that Stanmore's Radio Brockley won the hospital station of the year award? It is a fantastic place, where I started out on my career in journalism, and it indeed needs a lot of support.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): That is great news, but could not the hon. Lady have saved that point for her speech? I am bothered about time at the moment.

Bob Blackman: I shall take your admonishment, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I want to give everyone equal time.

Bob Blackman: Absolutely.

We are on the cusp of the hospital's redevelopment. We require the trust development authority to sign off the business case, and work will start on the orthopaedic hospital immediately, with the demolition of existing buildings, the building of a brand-new hospital, with a private hospital alongside it, and the creation of 300 new homes, which are desperately needed in Harrow. This is clearly being held up by NHS bureaucracy. The Chancellor granted the money back in 2010, yet we still await the start of the project.

On housing, my Harrow constituency has seen some 400 new starts, while there have been 560 new home completions in the last year alone, bringing new homes for my constituents. I am delighted that in the autumn spending review, the amount of money spent on housing is being more than doubled, which is something we should applaud.

Locally, we have heard some good news about schools. Park High School, St Bernadette's, Canons High School and the Krishna Avanti school will all receive additional funding for massive improvements—almost complete rebuilding in some cases. There is also the Aylward school, which is in desperate need of new facilities. We have also had the go-ahead, thanks to this Government's enlightened view, of Hujjat Primary School, which will be the first Muslim state-aided school, certainly in my constituency, and I strongly support it. Avanti House School will be the first state-aided Hindu school for secondary-aged children in the country. This is something of which we can be proud. It is being delivered in our multicultural society, and we are providing parents with the choice of education that they want for their children.

There is bad news, however. Harrow council has introduced the garden tax as part of its savings proposals. It is charging the princely sum of £75 for the service of collecting garden waste, and collecting it only once every three weeks. That is the highest charge in London. It is a scandal, because it is a monopoly service. So far, virtually no one has registered to use the service, but it is due to start on 1 April. What an appropriate date on which to launch such a foolish scheme. At the same time, fly-tipping and littering is a disaster. In Harrow, we are seeing fly-tipping all over the place.

Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): Shocking.

Bob Blackman: It is indeed shocking. The council should get its act together and clean up Harrow for the benefit of everyone—although its failure to do so would make it even easier for the incoming Conservative administration of 2018 to deliver.

There is, however, some further good news, which concerns Bentley Priory Museum. Bentley Priory is the site from which RAF Fighter Command delivered victory in the second world war, at the Battle of Britain. The Chancellor has given us £1 million for an education centre on the site, so that children and young people—and those who are not so young—can come and see for themselves what happened during the Battle of Britain, and how close we came to defeat. The fact that the few delivered victory for us is a tremendous thing, and we must ensure that people, young and old, understand and remember how close it was.

An issue that I have raised in the House on numerous occasions is the plight of the disabled when it comes to securing blue badges for parking in Harrow. Every day I learn that someone who is clearly disabled, and unable to walk any reasonable distance, has been prevented from obtaining a disabled parking permit. That strikes me as outrageous, and as a problem that we must overcome.

I want to make just one or two more points before I sit down and give the floor to others.

Mike Freer: Hear, hear.

Bob Blackman: I am more used to barracking from the other side. However, my hon. Friend is the Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary.

During the Budget debate, I raised the plight of the Equitable Life policyholders. It is to the eternal credit of the Chancellor and his team that we honoured our election promise in 2010, and delivered a scheme to compensate the victims of that scandal. However, there are still some very vulnerable people—the pre-1992 trapped annuitants—who have received only a small fraction of the money that is due to them in comparison with the loss that they suffered. I believe that we owe a debt of honour to those people, and that we should honour that debt by delivering 100% compensation to them.

Moreover, nearly a million people in other categories have not received full compensation, and I believe that they are also owed a debt of honour. We need to ensure that more money is provided so that those people can lead a proper life in retirement, because they had saved for their retirement and, through no fault of their own but as a result of a scandal, were then deprived of a reasonable income. The all-party parliamentary group for justice for equitable life policyholders now has more than 200 members, and we will continue to battle until such time as the Chancellor sees fit to let us have some more money for those people who are due compensation.

Another all-party parliamentary group of which I am a member, the all-party parliamentary group on primary care and public health, recently released a key report about the signposting of people in the NHS. Far too often, people who are ill arrive in accident and emergency departments when they should be seeing someone in the primary care sector, such as a GP or a nurse. We must do more to ensure that that happens.

I want to raise another health-related matter, namely stopping smoking. I warmly welcome the Chancellor's decision to continue to increase the tobacco tax by 2% above inflation, with a 3% increase in the rate for hand-rolling tobacco. That is a good move, and it should continue. However, I think we should go further. Given that the Chancellor has now talked about a sugar tax to drive behaviour, let us have a tobacco tax to do the same. By increasing the tax on tobacco by just 1p per cigarette, we would deliver £500 million a year that could be invested in smoking cessation services.

This year, I had the honour of paying my first visit to India. My visit to Jammu and Kashmir cemented my view that that country, and above all the people of Jammu and Kashmir, should be reunited as part of India. They should have the right to be integrated, and the Pakistani forces should leave Pakistani-occupied Kashmir. I also had the opportunity to visit the world cultural festival. We talk about the brilliant work that was done at the Olympics, but I saw at first hand the festival's 165,000 participants dancing and performing. Nearly 2.5 million people attended. We talk about the grand schemes that we organise, but just imagine what it would be like to put a festival like that together.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It sounds like the Hull city of culture.

Bob Blackman: It was indeed deeply cultural.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish you and all the staff of the House a very happy Easter. I trust that you will have a chance to take a break. I just want to mention one more thing that I am concerned about. On Easter eggs now, we never see the word "Easter". They are just chocolate eggs. The "Easter" has been taken away. It is time that we restored the "Easter" to Easter eggs.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I must now introduce a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

3.21 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): It is a huge pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who is a great champion of the ethnic minority communities. He has managed to mention every festival that has occurred in every community, and he has even spoken Hindi in the House. I am surprised that it has taken him so long to get to India, knowing his huge friendship with the Hindu and Indian communities. I agree with what he said about Stanmore station, although it is actually quite good for me, as someone with type 2 diabetes, to climb those 39 steps at the end of every day.

As the hon. Gentleman is here, may I also ask him to take up the issue of the traffic on Brockley Hill? We will not wait for the Minister's response, but the traffic there is getting very fast. We miss having the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) as the leader of Barnet Council, because I know that if he had still been there, he would have sorted this out. I hope that he will have a word with the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) to see what can be done to reduce the traffic flow on that road.

The hon. Member for Harrow East mentioned anniversaries and festivals. I have a very sad anniversary to report to the House. Saturday 26 March will mark the first anniversary of the conflict in Yemen. Of course, Yemen has been the subject of conflict for many years, but it is only recently that that conflict has turned into something of a civil war. The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) secured a debate on this subject only yesterday in Westminster Hall, and I commend him and others who have raised the matter in the House.

Since the start of the conflict a year ago, 8,800 civilians have been killed or injured and at this moment 3 million children are out of school. Access to medication in besieged areas such as Taiz has become virtually impossible. I am pleased to note that the UN-sponsored peace talks have been rescheduled for 18 April in Kuwait. The talks resumed some time ago before being adjourned. They can succeed only with the strong support of the United Kingdom Government, and I urge the Deputy Leader of the House to pass on the hope of all of us who care about Yemen that the Government will give their full support to what is happening there.

Yesterday, the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen, which I have the privilege of chairing, heard about the problems still occurring in the country from Médecins sans Frontières, Amnesty International, and several freelance journalists. The situation is a catastrophe, and it is important that we work hard to resolve the conflict. I commend the other members of the APPG who attended the meeting: the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) and my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), both of whom were, like myself, born in Yemen, the hon. Members for Charnwood (Edward Argar), for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and Baroness Uddin. All of them took time out of their busy days to attend the meeting at which we heard these terrible updates.

The Budget has been the subject of controversy in the House, but I liked one particular aspect of it: the introduction of the sugar tax. Easter is not a good time to talk about not having too much sugar and not eating too many chocolates, but I congratulate the Chancellor on taking the brave decision to introduce the sugar tax, and the Public Health Minister, the hon. Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), and the diabetes tsar Jonathan Valabhji on what they have done. We should not wait two years for the tax to be imposed; Government Departments can act swiftly now. Simon Stevens, the chief executive of NHS England, decided in February this year to impose his own 20% sugar tax across the NHS in England. The hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), before funding the lift that the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) wants so much, has imposed his own sugar tax in City Hall. We need to do this rapidly and we could even do it in the House. When we get to the counter in the Tea Room to pay for the bananas and apples that I am sure we all buy, do we have to be confronted by Club biscuits and Coca-Cola in the fridge? Let us make an effort to ensure that Members are not seduced by those who would rather allow us to have products full of sugar.

[Keith Vaz]

This week, the Government announced their national diabetes prevention programme, on which 100,000 people will be offered places to prevent them from developing type 2 diabetes. I am extremely pleased that the east midlands has been selected and that one of the areas will be in my constituency of Leicester East. I am concerned, however, by the recent decision of the local health authority and the clinical commissioning group to move the DAFNE services from the Leicester Diabetes Centre to a private pharmaceutical company to ensure that type 2 diabetics get support. Such services ought to be provided by those who invented the schemes. DESMOND was invented in Leicester and has been rolled out across the country. The DAFNE scheme, which is specific to type 1 diabetes, is now under pressure. I will certainly be raising DAFNE and DESMOND when we get back after the recess. They are essential to ensure proper services for those of us who are diabetic and to those of us who want to ensure that diabetes is kept under control.

I thank the Deputy Leader of the House for mentioning the Tiffin cup when she spoke earlier today. The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) is one of its great champions. I think he has nominated somewhere every year since the cup has been in existence—I am sure for reasons involving low-fat food. I hope that Members will get their nominations in over the Easter holidays.

I echo what the hon. Member for Harrow East said about Johan Cruyff, who was a great footballer. I want to end by mentioning my football team and the momentous season of Leicester City football club, which has led the premier league since before Christmas. Leicester City is a bastion of multiculturalism. It is owned by a Thai, Vichai Srivaddhanaprabha. We have an Irish chief executive in Susan Whelan and an Italian manager in Claudio Ranieri. We also have players from all over the globe: Riyad Mahrez from Algeria, Kasper Schmeichel, who is the great Dane, Robert Huth from Germany, Ngolo Kante from France, Shinji Okazaki from Japan, Marcin Wasilewski from Poland, Jeff Schlupp of Ghana, Ulloa from Argentina, and our own Vardy and Morgan. We have lots of home-grown players, too.

It is marvellous to see a team like Leicester City, which I have supported for all the 29 years I have been a Member of Parliament, not far from your constituency in North East Derbyshire, Madam Deputy Speaker, breaking the monopoly of the big four. The sports agent Charlie Stillitano argued for a closed European champions system, saying that only the big four should be able to get to the Champions League every year. What Leicester City has shown, whatever the results at the end of the day—obviously, I hope we will go on to lift the premier league trophy—is the importance of having teams like Leicester being able to compete at the highest level, and indeed being at the head of the English premier league, the greatest football league in the world. With seven games left, we are five points ahead, and so I look forward to a very interesting two weeks. I hope that even for those whose team is Spurs or Arsenal and they want them to win the league—

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): And West Ham.

Keith Vaz: Or West Ham. I hope that these people make Leicester their second choice—it almost sounds like an election. If we win that trophy, it will be a huge boost for all those who feel that the dream can really be lived.

3.31 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Before the House adjourns for the Easter recess, I wish to raise a number of points. If Take That were here, they would probably sing “It’s good to be back”, at least as far as the Easter Adjournment debate is concerned. Now, c2c was the happy line but it has returned to being the misery line, although I was delighted to hear from one of our Ministers this week that the Department for Transport will waive the clause in the franchise agreement that states that 95% of trains must stop at Barking, West Ham and Limehouse. That would be the first positive move towards restoration on the timetable changes that have upset so many people. I must say shame on National Express for writing to the chairman of the Conservative party complaining that I was representing my constituents—it has not heard the last from me and it has no chance now of getting the franchise for the Greater Anglia railway.

I have the privilege of being the chairman of the all-party group on fire safety & rescue. We had an excellent meeting this week and we would very much like the review of the guidance to building regulations, whose origins are in the last century, to bring about a change, and we want the relevant Minister to look very carefully at the regulations. We also had an excellent meeting with the Minister for Schools about sprinklers being installed when new schools are built. It is crazy that that arrangement has stopped since 2007, but I am very optimistic that he will change all that. The third issue I wish to raise, which hon. Members will be aware of, is the arrangements for police and crime commissioners under the Policing and Crime Bill. The all-party group remains concerned about the impact those might have on the ongoing arrangements for fire safety while building regulations remain under the Department for Communities and Local Government.

Like many other Members, I am absolutely, as the Kinks might have sung, tired of waiting for the Chilcot report. This has gone on and on and on, and the latest information is that its publication will be delayed until after the EU referendum. That is not good enough and the families deserve far better than that.

I had the privilege of introducing a ten-minute rule Bill on 27 January, the Driving Instructors (Registration) Bill, and I am delighted that it swiftly went through all its stages in the House of Commons. The amendments outlined in the Bill make it easier for instructors to leave the register without penalty and to re-register at a later date, without compromising the standards necessary to ensure safe and competent instruction. I am also delighted to tell the House that it is now going through the relevant stages in the House of Lords, and we hope to get Royal Assent in May. I say to colleagues that it is worth pioneering ten-minute rule Bills.

As most colleagues know, Southend will be the alternative city of culture in 2017, and we are very excited by that. Hull has decided to have four seasonal events, but Southend will be having an event every month. The Secretary of

State for Culture, Media and Sport visited Southend recently, when he saw the wonderful work of Metal—we have the first digital exhibition in a local park. We have also seen the opening of our wonderful new library, The Forum, and had the opening of a branch of the National Jazz Archive, a project headed by the wonderful local jazz musician Digby Fairweather. I also attended wonderful concerts by Southend Vox, Southend Festival Chorus and the Southend Youth Orchestra. I urge all colleagues in the House to head to Southend next year and they will receive a royal welcome.

The Chairman of Ways and Means was the winner last year of the first responsible pet ownership competition. In fact, he had about a dozen pets there, including a parrot and a huge tortoise. The second event, which I hope as many colleagues as possible will attend, will take place in July on the green by Victoria Tower. Pets should never be acquired as a fashion accessory, and breeders should do more to make buyers aware of the duty of care to their pets, including microchipping and neutering.

I had the honour of sponsoring salt awareness week, which sort of ties in with sugar. I was shocked to discover that many of our staple products, such as bread, cornflakes, tinned tomato soup and Cheddar cheese, contain high levels of salt. Under the Food Standards Agency and the Consensus Action on Salt and Health, the UK led the world in salt reduction and prevented unnecessary deaths. That excellent work now needs to be reinvigorated by the Department of Health, and we need to look again at setting up an independent agency to regulate the amount of salt that manufacturers add to their foods.

Recently, I met representatives from Safer Medicines, an independent group, which aims to change the way that medicines are tested, so that they are safer for patients. It is an absolutely excellent idea. It wishes to end the testing of medicines on animals not necessarily because of animal cruelty issues—although that is a very serious concern—but because animal testing cannot predict safe medicines for humans.

Let me turn now to meningitis. Recently, in my constituency, the head girl of a local school tragically died at the age of 17. I do not know how her family can cope with that tragedy. Vital work is being carried out by the Meningitis Research Foundation and Meningitis Now. I understand that 800,000 people recently signed a petition, calling for the meningitis B vaccine to be given to all children up to the age of 11, and there will be a debate on that in this place on 25 April.

Recently, I held two health summits in Southend, bringing together all the health providers. My feeling is that those providers are not necessarily working that well together. Certainly, senior management in one or two areas needs to do far better than it is doing at the moment. I hope that, from the health summits, the quality of patient care and the delivery of health services in Southend can improve. We need all local healthcare providers and the local authority to work more closely together on that work, as was shown by the Mid and South Essex Success Regime.

I raised the matter of fuel poverty this morning, and I did a 30 second appearance on “Panorama” this week. I piloted the Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill through the House some 15 years ago, so it is a bit

disappointing that fuel poverty has still not been eliminated. I urge Ministers to do everything they can to change that situation.

Like all Members, I have some wonderful local companies in my constituency. Planet Leasing, an independent vehicle brokerage company, has been trading for nearly 10 years and now employs 25 staff across four branches. I recently visited its newly refurbished offices, which is an indication of its confidence in future growth. The company has received an Employer of the Year award and an apprenticeship award for the work that it has done with local young people. I also attended the opening of a new office for Peglers Removals, a family business, and celebrated 40 years in business for the company, Just the Job. I am absolutely delighted that, in one popular measure in the Budget, the Government changed the business rate on small outlets. That will certainly make a huge difference to those firms.

Recently, I went with an all-party delegation to the Maldives, which was sponsored by the Government there, to see at first hand not what celebrities are telling us is going on in the Maldives, but what is actually happening. We went everywhere, including to the prison in which former President Nasheed is being held at the moment. The all-party group had a meeting yesterday, a report was published and I hope that the Government will look very carefully at its findings.

I am also the chairman of the all-party group for the Philippines and was able this week to meet a wonderful woman called Luz Bador, founder of the National Rural Women’s Coalition. She was instrumental in playing a key role in responding to the terrible disaster in the Philippines. The Government have done an excellent job on that and I urge full support for the world humanitarian summit coming up in Istanbul this May.

I am delighted that Chase High School, Westcliff High School for Girls and Eastwood Academy are getting lots of money.

I end by joining everyone, I presume, in celebrating the Queen’s 90th birthday next year. We had a president from 1997 to 2010—well, for 10 years anyway—and it was not a great success. The Queen is absolutely fantastic and I congratulate one of our colleagues whose idea it was, I think, to have the Clean for the Queen project. My local councillor, Meg Davidson, led a group in doing that last week. The Queen set an example to each and every one of us when she made that broadcast saying that however long her life was, she would do everything she could for our nation.

I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and everyone else a very happy Easter.

3.41 pm

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for securing this debate, particularly the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I am especially grateful that this is a general debate, if only because we did not hear at Christmas the canter around Southend West and elsewhere from the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), of whom I am reminded almost every week when I cross my constituency and pass the Croes Lan post office, run by his excellent cousin, Ms Janice Pocock. The hon. Gentleman spoke on many issues, but I am going to speak about just one, an issue of concern to me and to

[*Mr Mark Williams*]

one particular constituent of mine, Mr Michael Affonso. It concerns his dealings with the UK Border Agency and my dealings, on his behalf, with the Home Office. It is a personal, unresolved story and I shall use my time to tell it.

Mr Affonso was born in Tanzania, has lived in this country for more than 30 years, is married to a British national and has had protracted concerns over the status of his citizenship, which are, as yet, not satisfactorily resolved. I believe there are other cases of British nationals with spouses from overseas who have been seeking British citizenship for many years and perhaps do not fit into the conventional mould of immigration cases.

Michael Affonso was born in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania in 1969. Not long after his birth, he was taken in by a lady who brought him up as her own child and he lived happily with her and her family for the first 15 years of his life in the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro. In 1984, his biological mother visited him, their relationship was rekindled and they came to Britain. She was married to a British citizen. Michael remembers his arrival in the UK and being questioned by Border Agency officials at the airport. He then moved to Kettering and was established with his biological mother's family and with her new husband, though the adoption by his new stepfather seems never to have taken place.

Despite the challenges of moving to a new country he settled in, but around 1986 problems emerged in the family and through no fault of his own he was taken into care under Northamptonshire social services. He recalls telling the court at the time that he wanted to return to Tanzania to be with the lady he saw as his real mother, but the court said that as he had never been legally adopted he had to stay in the country of his biological mother—that is, this country—despite being removed from her care.

Michael then spent some time at a children's home in Kettering and was subsequently sent to foster care. At the age of 18 he moved out and spent several years living independently, starting college, gaining an NVQ in painting and decorating, and living in that area for many years. Some years later, the lady who had brought him up in Tanzania moved to the UK and settled in Wales, where he moved, settling in the village of Llanwnnen in my constituency. By 2008 he had met his future wife Sian, and they set up home together in Aberarth, also in the Ceredigion constituency.

The troubles arose when the couple decided to get married. As Michael had entered the UK from Tanzania as a minor, he held no official paperwork himself. He recalled a birth certificate and a Tanzanian passport, but while living in Kettering, many years before the move to Wales, a fire at his flat had destroyed any paperwork, including his passport. Sian and Michael were unable to get married without proof of his nationality, and that is where I first became involved in his case.

We struggled to find any information from anywhere—any official documentation about Michael's life. We made inquiries of Nottinghamshire social services to find out whether anything had been done, or not done, about citizenship under their care. We spoke to the Tanzanian embassy to inquire about his passport. We used various freedom of information requests, but kept

hitting brick wall after brick wall. There is little, if any, information about Michael. There was an account of his being taken into care in Northamptonshire, but no information as to the date or where he was sent. That lack of information was subsequently acknowledged by the Home Office.

It seemed as if the couple's aspiration for marriage would not be realised, but rules did mercifully change, with an EU ruling that made it against one's human rights to be denied a marriage, so in October 2011 the couple were married. All seemed well. Life settled down in the village of Aberarth; the couple bought a home. Michael became heavily involved in our community—a very much valued member of the community, now an elected community councillor. Indeed he is, I would suggest, the identikit community activist.

Michael pursued a change of career and became manager of the British Red Cross shop, first in Cardigan, then in Aberaeron and then Carmarthen. At that point problems emerged as, not unreasonably, he started to get requests from the human resources department to prove his eligibility to work within the UK—something he had not come across in all the previous years. As a non-British citizen, he requires a biometric residency card. He contacted the Home Office and was told that he needed proof that he had resided in the UK with no lengthy times away. Of course, he had not been away because he had no passport, although for someone who was unaware of that stipulation it was very difficult to prove. However, we had some successes in finding some information from the health board in Northamptonshire and my local health board, the Hywel Dda health board, in Ceredigion, and Michael had been assiduous in keeping records—P45s and P60s.

Michael then set about the process of application for a no time limit application. The couple paid to go to a premium service centre, the nearest one being in Cardiff, on 5 November 2014, having spent £104 on the form and a further £400 for the privilege of a priority centre meeting. The couple really thought they were on the cusp of securing British citizenship for Michael. Despite the gathering of what documentation they had, including at long last a notice of care proceedings when he had been removed from his biological mother's care, they were told that because he himself had no proof of entering the country, he was in fact an illegal immigrant. Mercifully, subsequent events meant that that accusation was retracted. Despite the fact that he had resided in the UK for more than 30 years, had paid his taxes and national insurance contributions and was a valued member of the community and was married to a British national, he faced that allegation.

The couple met with some sympathy from the UK Border Agency when they showed the UKBA copies of letters that I wrote on their behalf in 2009 on their wish to be married—proof that the couple had sought to resolve the issue. They were offered an alternative to the full naturalisation process: Michael would have to reapply for leave to remain every two and a half years—the next occasion being in 2017—at a cost of £500 each time, until he had 10 years' worth of visas. After 10 years, in 2024, he might be entitled to apply for British citizenship. However, he would be unable to have any recourse to public funds, which was confirmed to me in a letter from the Minister for Immigration in July 2015.

This man has paid national insurance contributions and tax for 30 years. He has been entitled to jobseeker's allowance in the past. He is now denied an automatic right to benefit unless special circumstances emerge. I have to say that Mr Affonso feels incredibly let down by this state of affairs and it has taken a serious toll on his health, compounded by the fact that despite being seriously ill and so unable to work, his biometric residency card states that he has no automatic recourse to public funds. The Home Office to date has been reluctant to look into this matter in great depth and seems intent on sticking by its original decision that Mr Affonso may have to wait until 2024 to achieve full citizenship.

Much of the debate on immigration these days is, not unreasonably, about people needing to come to this country. We have all worked on many such cases in our constituencies, but this case is different. It is about an injustice that has been perpetrated against someone who is already here and who, through no fault of his own, has faced many challenges. He came here as a minor, and the various agencies that were charged with his care did not address the issue of citizenship. He is a highly valued member of the community and now in adulthood he is trying to right a wrong, and aspires to do the right thing, but has faced a real problem in trying to trace his own identity.

The letter I had from the Immigration Minister last year said:

"I am sure you will understand that it is not possible"

to agree to indefinite leave to remain for somebody who does not hold the necessary documentation. The Minister refused to meet me to discuss the matter further. I understand what the Minister said and I think it represents a great injustice.

In this case the lack of documentation has not been the responsibility of my constituent, the aggrieved individual. I implore the Deputy Leader of the House, on my behalf and on behalf of Mr Affonso, to pursue this matter with the Home Office and to ask it to look again at this case, not just at the issue of the recourse to public funds in the case of illness, but at Mr Affonso's right to remain in the United Kingdom.

3.51 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams), who outlines a case typical of many that all of us face and typical of the bureaucratic complexities that we all have to deal with.

The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who is no longer in his place, referred to Leicester City and the team's good fortune this year. As someone who has always had a soft spot for Arsenal among the premier league teams, I am somewhat reluctant to praise Leicester, but as Arsenal is almost certainly not going to get the top spot, like most people I want to see Leicester triumph. That gives me an opportunity to talk about the triumphs of Grimsby Town. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) is nodding. Last Saturday the team secured a place at Wembley in the final of the FA Trophy, when yet again the players will march towards what were the twin towers. We hope for victory.

Grimsby Town—not that Members need reminding—play in Cleethorpes, which is in the headlines yet again. We have even more culture than Southend. We are the

premier resort of the east coast. Cleethorpes pier has just been named as pier of the year. It is worth putting on record our congratulations to Bryan Huxford and his team at the pier, who have just carried out a multimillion-pound restoration, which has been a great addition to the resort. It secured some resources from the regional growth fund, so we have all made a contribution to the renewal of Cleethorpes pier. We can compare the recent multimillion-pound investment with the £8,000 that it cost to construct the pier, which opened in 1873.

The main part of my contribution is, yet again, about transport connections in northern Lincolnshire, highlighting a recent report produced jointly by the Department for Transport and Transport for the North. It is entitled "The Northern Powerhouse: One Agenda, One Economy, One North". The problem is that it does not seem to refer to northern Lincolnshire.

I have been a great supporter of the northern powerhouse initiative. Ministers have repeatedly emphasised that northern Lincolnshire and the Humber estuary are very much a part of that. In particular, the Humber is referred to as the energy estuary and it is important to the economy. As we are reminded time and again, in order to maximise local economies, good transport connections are needed.

Devolution is fine, and I have been a great advocate of it—particularly the Greater Lincolnshire deal that has been secured recently—but the problem is that, although the Government have many ideals, they are reliant, as those ideals cascade through the system, on organisations such as Transport for the North, local authorities and health trusts, which may have slightly different priorities.

The foreword to the report, which is jointly signed by the Secretary of State for Transport and Richard Leese, the chairman of the Transport for the North partnership, states:

"Creating the 'Northern Powerhouse' of economic growth, driven by a flourishing private sector and supported by innovative local government requires us to harness and unify the people power of our city regions and the wider North... The North has many centres of excellence increasingly recognised on the global stage".

The report goes on to list those, beginning with Liverpool and ending with the Tees Valley, but there is no mention of Lincolnshire.

When Sir David Higgins took up his post as chairman of HS2, he said that

"there is huge untapped potential for much more trade and commerce across the Pennines".

We hear repeatedly about trans-Pennine connections that emphasise the northern trans-Pennine route, but my constituency, in northern Lincolnshire, depends on the southern trans-Pennine route. We are served—on the whole, reasonably well—by TransPennine Express, although the word "express" is used loosely, I think, since it takes three and a half hours to get from Cleethorpes to Manchester. Covering the 50 miles from Cleethorpes to Doncaster—as the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and I have to every week to get our connection to King's Cross—takes one and a quarter hours, which, in 2016, is quite a long time.

The report says that transforming city-to-city rail connectivity east to west, as well as north to south, is one of the main aims of Government policy and of

[*Martin Vickers*]

Transport for the North. However, to maximise that connectivity, we need much better rail connections. I have campaigned repeatedly for a direct service between Grimsby, Cleethorpes and London King's Cross. An application to run such a service has been with the rail regulator for two years now, but—I talked of bureaucracy earlier—does it really take two years to assess whether it is viable? I realise that the problem facing the rail regulator is that open-access operators such as Alliance Rail, which made the application, have to show that they are creating new business, rather than taking business away from the main franchise holders, but I urge the rail regulator to come to a speedy conclusion. Even if it is negative, we can then move on and renew the campaign through a different route.

Road connections fare slightly better in the report, which acknowledges the importance of access to our ports. The port of Immingham is, measured by tonnage, the largest in the country, and 25% of rail freight starts or ends there. Yet, when it comes to road connections, we have struggled, in as much as the M180 ends about 20 or 25 miles from the port. We urgently need an upgrade of the A180 to motorway standards. We need to improve the road surface, which causes no end of problems. The A180 has one of those awful concrete surfaces, and it is possible to sit in the front rooms of people in villages two miles away and hear the constant rumble of vehicles on the road. I have been campaigning on that issue—indeed, my predecessor and her predecessor campaigned on it—and it really does need urgent attention.

The report refers, quite reasonably, to the upgrade of the A160, which provides new access to the port of Immingham, but I have to tell the House that that upgrade is almost complete—it will be completed by August or September—so this is hardly a vision for the future.

The report also states:

“Many rail journeys in the North—particularly east-west—are too slow and take far longer than journeys of equivalent distance elsewhere in the country”.

As I said earlier, a three-hour journey from Cleethorpes to Manchester cannot exactly be described as a trans-Pennine express.

May I urge my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House to pass on my comments to the appropriate Ministers? I look forward to a detailed response from them in due course.

4 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers).

I have tabled early-day motion 1235, praying that the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Regulations 2016, which affect frozen pensions, be annulled. To date, it is supported by 93 Members from eight parties represented in the House, including members of the governing party. It is a pity that the Government have yet to concede to a debate on the matter, and I wonder how many Members will need to sign that praying motion before they will do so.

The uprating regulations that deprive overseas pensioners of the uprating adjustment to their state pensions are

being forced through this House without a proper and full debate. The decision to freeze pensions for a further year will come into effect in early April, when this House will be in recess. I believe that the House should have the opportunity to debate the matter, which not only leaves 550,000 UK pensioners facing hardship, but discourages many UK citizens living in the UK from returning to their country of origin, as many wish to do in their retirement. I should also like to add that the United Kingdom is the only country in the OECD that freezes pensions in this manner.

There is no consistency in how overseas British pensioners are treated. Due to historical bilateral deals, pensioners living in many countries, including the US, get an uprated pension. Those who live in the US Virgin Islands will get a UK pension at the full rate, but those living in the British Virgin Islands will have their pension frozen.

The Government argue that pensions are uprated for those living in countries where the UK has a social security agreement. The UK does not need an agreement with any country to pay a pension. Other countries do not pay a pensioner any extra money; it has nothing to do with them if a UK citizen receives a pension. How own earth can the Government substantiate that?

Let me give three examples of how pensioners are affected. Abhik Bonnerjee, now 73, moved from India to Glasgow in 1960. He worked in the UK for 38 years, in shipbuilding, steel manufacture and the food industry. He also owned an Indian restaurant for six years. Abhik returned to India in 1997 and reached the state pension retirement age in 2008, when it was paid at £87.30 a week. Having made all the required national insurance contributions, if Abhik were still in the UK today he would get £115.95—28% more. The decline in his real-term income has left Abhik concerned about losing his home. He now feels that he may have to move back to the United Kingdom.

Rita Young, who is 78, lives in Peterborough in the UK. She retired in 2002, aged 67, having enjoyed a long career in market research and as a community volunteer. Rita's son moved to work in Australia some time ago and now has a family there. Since being widowed, Rita has wanted to join her son and grandchildren in Australia but has felt unable to do so because of the prospect of a frozen pension. As she gets older, Rita finds daily life increasingly difficult, especially as she does not have family around her. She is deeply saddened that she is not able to be with her family during the later stages of her life. It does not seem fair that the Government can stop uprating just because someone says, “I want to be with my family.”

Lastly, former college lecturer Anne Puckridge, now 91, lived and worked in the UK all her working life, paying mandatory national insurance contributions throughout that time. In 2002, aged 77, she finally retired and decided to move to Canada to be with her daughter and grandchildren, who had moved to Calgary. Fourteen years on, Anne, who served as an intelligence officer in the Women's Royal Naval Service in the second world war, is struggling to live on a frozen pension of £75.20 a week. Anne now feels that she will be forced to move back to Britain because her pension will no longer cover day-to-day expenses, and she is increasingly reliant on her daughter to get by. That cannot be right or just. As she has said,

“It’s the small things, and the injustice, that is really getting to me. I value my independence, but I can’t go on living on the breadline and I don’t want to inflict this on my family. As well as ever-increasing poverty, I feel a sense of stress and shame, which is affecting my health.”

We must also consider the implications of the upcoming EU referendum. There are 400,000 UK pensioners living in EU countries. The question of those additional people facing the potential freezing of their pensions is, in my opinion, a matter worthy of debate. We need some answers from the Government as to what would happen in the event of Brexit. Will those 400,000 pensioners also face the freezing of their pension? I hope when we return from recess that the House will have the opportunity to debate the matter fully, to give the Government the chance to reflect on this injustice. The Government ought to withdraw the measure and pay UK pensioners at home and abroad their due state pension, with the same uprating adjustment, in the interests of fairness and equality.

On that note, I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all in the House a happy Easter. I hope that our pensioners, wherever they live, will also have a happy Easter and that this injustice will ultimately be dealt with.

4.6 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and all others who have spoken. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for organising the debate, and I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and for Southend West (Sir David Amess) for their commitment to this institution; I am glad to see that it has been reinstated.

My thoughts and prayers as we approach Good Friday are with all those around the world—from Belgium to Turkey, from Syria to Jordan and Iraq, and in so many other places—who are suffering from mankind’s capacity for evil. At the same time, I believe, as a Christian, that evil will not triumph, as a result of the resurrection of Christ on Easter Sunday.

Earlier this month, colleagues on the Select Committee on International Development and I met in Abuja several hundred people from Borno state who had been driven from their homes by Boko Haram. They were in a makeshift camp, and they were being helped not by international organisations but by ordinary Nigerians, Christians and Muslims, working together. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) was there alongside me. A school had been set up, and there was a church. Those people were far from home, but they had hope that they could soon return to their homes in Borno.

Our visit to Nigeria also showed why our country’s commitment to international development is so important. Kano is a city of many millions, and it has a long and distinguished history, but it has suffered greatly in recent years from terrorism. Its people, though, are full of spirit, and the UK is right there with them, supporting schools, the training of midwives, economic development and the battle against neglected tropical diseases, malaria and many other ills. We met a group of girls and women and asked them how things were compared with a year ago. Spontaneously, they replied that things were much better, and they had real hope for the future.

We visited a primary school—the largest in west Africa, with 13,000 students—and saw committed teachers teaching a strong curriculum that had been developed with the support of the United Kingdom. We also went to an Islamic school, which, with UK help, had started teaching maths, English, science and other subjects to girls and boys together. It was delightful to see that one of the songs chalked up on the blackboard for the children to learn was the “Hokey-Cokey”. In the midst of the serious matter of educating the next generation in Kano, there was time for play and song.

That brings me to the importance of play and sport in my constituency. Last weekend, the Stafford half marathon and fun run had more entrants than ever, and the number of people taking part in sport continues to rise. Stafford Town FC, under the dynamic chairmanship of Gordon Evans, has 31 teams and a waiting list. I have the honour of being involved in the club as honorary president. The club will soon start to install a 3G pitch, which will be a welcome improvement.

Elsewhere, we face a serious loss of sports facilities. The sale of the large Staffordshire University campus to an investor from China for education purposes means that the sports centre, which is used by thousands of my constituents every week, will close to the public this summer. Pitches may also be lost. We have written to the new investor and the university to urge that the sports centre and pitches be kept and continue to be made available to the public. I ask the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who has responsibility for sport, for her support to ensure that that happens in this Olympic year.

Even more recently, we found out that the handing over of the Shugborough stately home and estate by the county council to the National Trust may mean the loss of cricket and football pitches, which are used by several teams from the villages of Haywood, Colwich, Milford and elsewhere. The National Trust wishes to return the field, which is a very small part of the estate, to 18th-century parkland. I am a member and a fan of the National Trust and I know that its stewardship of Shugborough will be in the estate’s best interests, but our heritage must be a living heritage. After all, the west coast main line passes right through the middle of the estate. It was constructed with the permission of the then Earl of Lichfield, who saw no problem in combining 18th-century Capability Brown parkland with 19th-century steam trains; it is now combined with 21st-century Pendolinos. I am sure that the estate workers played football and cricket, so why not let those sports, whose histories are considerably older than Shugborough’s, continue on the site? I urge the National Trust to think again.

When the Earl of Lichfield allowed the railway to pass through the Shugborough estate, he did so on one condition, which was that the railway should not be visible from his home. A cut-and-cover tunnel was therefore constructed, and it is still there today. The builders of the railway were wise and they acted on the concerns of local residents—in this case, the Earl of Lichfield. If railway builders in the 19th century could listen to him, I am sure that in these more democratic days they can listen to me and my constituents. HS2 passes through the villages of Great Haywood, Ingestre, Hopton, Martson and Yarlet. It does so because of the unnecessary lust for ultra-high speed and therefore the

[Jeremy Lefroy]

requirement for an arrow-straight route. If the route cannot be changed—I firmly believe there are alternatives that would easily meet the passenger forecasts—my constituents and I want considerably more tunnelling to protect them from the worst of the impact, as the Earl of Lichfield was so protected 200 years ago. Yet in the latest proposal, the one short tunnel proposed, in Hopton, has been removed. There is plenty of opportunity for tunnelling in the Stafford area, as is shown by the depth of the proposed cuttings. Our UK tunnelling expertise is world class, so I urge the Government to listen to us, as their predecessors listened to the Earl of Lichfield.

It is now almost a year and a half since Stafford hospital, now the County hospital, was brought together with the Royal Stoke hospital as part of the University Hospitals of North Midlands NHS Trust. I want to pay tribute to all the staff who helped to make such a difficult transition as smooth as possible. It is a tribute to their dedication and professionalism that we have in Stafford a hospital that offers high standards of care.

For many months, the A&E department has been one of the best performing in the country. Until recently, it regularly achieved the four-hour target for 95% of patients. It is now under more pressure, as the numbers attending have risen to an annual rate of nearly 50,000. As many are now seen in 14 hours as were previously seen in 24 hours. That shows just how essential it is to maintain the consultant-led A&E at the County hospital. Let us not forget that one of the proposals in 2013, against which my constituents and I argued strongly, was to remove consultant-led A&E. Thank goodness that common sense prevailed. I still maintain, as does the Secretary of State for Health, that a return to 24/7 emergency opening has to come. I understand the constraints and safety concerns, but I welcome the fact that the refurbished A&E department will be capable of 24/7 opening, because I believe that that will be essential.

At the same time, we lost our in-patient paediatrics and consultant-led maternity care. They have been replaced by an emergency children's department and a stand-alone midwife-led maternity unit. Although there is great sadness at the loss of the larger services, my constituents who use the new units have been full of praise for the care that they and their children have received from the staff. I want to work with the trust gradually to build these services back up.

The investment in the County hospital, which has already taken place and will continue to take place, is welcome. I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for his support for that. We will have refurbished wards, operating theatres, dialysis and chemotherapy suites, A&E and the children's emergency centre. The new MRI scanner—a first for Stafford—is already in operation, as is a state-of-the-art endoscopy unit. We will in effect have a new hospital in an old building, without the burden of a private finance initiative. I thank the Government for this investment, but buildings are nothing without people. As always, we must continue to put the care and safety of patients at the forefront, and I pay tribute to the staff for doing just that.

Businesses are thriving in Stafford with employment at a record high. General Electric and Alstom is building a factory on one of the two new business parks. Perkins Engines and Bostik continue to invest, and I am proud

that JCB now has a strong presence in my constituency after its purchase of Broadcrown in Hixon. Mid-sized manufacturers such as Mec Com, Biomass, Landons, Rail-Ability, and many others, show that what would be called the *Mittelstand* in Germany is alive and well in Stafford. The digital economy is expanding, with companies such as eg solutions, risual, Connexica and iProspect recruiting almost continuously—so much so that a group now meets regularly to see how we can improve the digital economy in Stafford.

The advent of 1 and 16 Signal Regiments to MOD Stafford to join 22 Signal Regiment and the RAF's tactical supply wing means that nearly 2,000 servicemen and women are now based in the town. They are already making a great contribution to life in Stafford, and they tell me that they appreciate the warm welcome.

Let me mention the road infrastructure in and around Stafford. We have seen improvements, such as the four lanes of the M6 from junctions 10A to 13, but we need the western access road and many other small and large improvements to the road network, to provide for the growth that Stafford is seeing. Finally, I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, a very happy Easter.

4.16 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), whose sincerity in serving his constituents and his concern for the poorest across the globe, particularly in Africa, is unparalleled in this place.

I want to speak in support of the wonderful town of Middlewich in my constituency, and to champion its irrefutable claim for Government funding for a bypass—a bypass that has been 20 years in the waiting, and for which planning permission was first granted two decades ago. If traffic was pressured then, one hardly needs to imagine how much more pressured it is now. Travelling through Middlewich—not just at peak time—one can justifiably describe the congestion as chronic. It is the worst in my constituency by far.

Middlewich has an exceptionally strong community spirit and a high level of volunteering among its residents, as demonstrated by a whole host of community events that take place throughout the year. The annual FAB—folk and boat—festival attracts up to 25,000 visitors in a week, almost doubling the town's population. It is the largest event in the country that celebrates canals and their narrowboats, and the surrounding heritage, music and culture. That is just one of many grassroots events promoted by the Middlewich townspeople. Others include a festival to celebrate the town's Roman heritage, an annual Oscars ceremony to celebrate local community champions, the Good Neighbours scheme, the classic car and bike show, the national town crier competition, a cider festival, the Scribe literary festival, heritage open days, and the nationally recognised Middlewich Clean Team of more than 200 residents, who are regularly out keeping the town tidy. I consider myself to be a privileged member of that team, and it was heart-warming to see the huge number of residents out recently to make the town of Middlewich "Clean for the Queen".

Middlewich is an aspirational town, and St Michael's church—a hub for community activity—is embarking on a £1.2 million regeneration scheme that will open it up for even greater community use. Community leaders

across the town have recently concluded a new town branding scheme, and Middlewich High School is fortunate to have a visionary headmaster in Keith Simpson.

However, over recent decades, Middlewich has simply not received the investment that it deserves from wider authorities to enable it to realise its substantial untapped potential. There has been a huge amount of grassroots energy and commitment from local townspeople, and they deserve greater support. There is space for enterprise and development to grow in Middlewich, and it wants and would welcome such growth and development, including housing development. It is essential to have greater investment for Middlewich, and I have campaigned for that since my election in 2010. I am pleased to tell the House that Middlewich's potential to make a substantial contribution to local and regional growth has now been recognised more widely. I am delighted that not only the townsfolk of Middlewich but Cheshire East Council and the local enterprise partnership now see Middlewich as a key town for development, with the potential for growth. That is important. The Government's Transport for the North report, "Northern Transport Strategy", which was produced this month, states:

"It is important to ensure economic benefits are spread across the North to deliver the vision of a Northern Powerhouse...and development opportunities are better connected to contribute to and benefit from"

key towns. If the aspiration of the northern powerhouse is to be realised, it is essential that Middlewich receives greater investment, and that means the Middlewich eastern bypass.

If I may, I would like to unpack just why the bypass is so important. The Middlewich eastern bypass is a major highway scheme. It would support the building of more than 2,000 new homes in and around Middlewich, thereby making a considerable contribution to facilitating the much-needed completion of the Cheshire East local plan. It would be a boost to existing businesses, which employ 4,500 people in Middlewich, and, according to figures from Cheshire East, enable the creation of a further 6,500 new jobs. That is why it is so important for the Government to consider supporting this major highways scheme by allocating funding from the Government's £475 million local majors funds. Local areas were invited by the Chancellor in his Budget statement last week to make further bids. I am recording a request now, on behalf of Middlewich, for funding from that fund, with the support of Cheshire East Council and the local LEP. The fund is for large local transport schemes, too big for the regular local growth fund. That applies to this bypass: it is a £30 million project. It is now a high priority for our principal authority and for our LEP.

In addition to helping to solve serious congestion issues locally, the bypass would also solve many regional transport problems. Cheshire East Council states that Middlewich is the worst pinch-point on the A54 corridor, which runs from the M6 across to Cheshire west. A bypass would help to relieve the pinch-point, and tackle a number of road safety issues in the town that have been a cause of great local concern for many years. If the bypass scheme involves, as I believe it should, local improvements, that would help to address and improve challenges along Lewin Street, Nantwich Road, the Newton Bank Gyratory and the junction of Leadsmith Street and St Michael's Way. Those improvements are essential to protect pedestrian safety and to improve pedestrian access to the town centre.

A bypass would provide better routes for heavy goods vehicles and a greatly improved link to the M6 Smart Motorway, which is now under construction. There is no point in making that very considerable investment to relieve congestion if vehicles find themselves stranded and stationary when they move off the M6 and on to the route to Middlewich. The route will also improve access to the HS2 Crewe hub when that opens. I am informed that the work required to develop the hub will involve considerable additional vehicular construction traffic. The construction of the bypass is essential if the region as a whole, not to mention Middlewich as a town, is not to be blighted by the HS2 construction traffic that will continue for very many years.

This week, the Minister for Housing and Planning, my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) attended the international property conference in Cannes to launch the northern gateway development zone prospectus. It sets out very ambitious growth proposals for south-east Cheshire and north Staffordshire, arising from the Government's decision to have a station at Crewe on the new HS2 line. These exciting proposals will deliver significant benefits to the local economy and have the potential to unlock major new growth and investment opportunities. These could deliver more than 100,000 new homes and 120,000 new jobs by 2040 by creating a growth zone at the gateway between the northern powerhouse and the midlands engine—the area is situated directly between the two.

Middlewich is an important focal point within the development area, but although the proposals are exciting and will deliver significant benefits to the economy, I understand from the LEP that the amount of traffic travelling through Middlewich, which already experiences high levels of congestion at peak times, could rise by up to 90%, if the plans are developed. The LEP is concerned, therefore, that its growth proposals will not be achieved unless the issue of congestion is addressed through investment in local infrastructure—and that means the Middlewich eastern bypass and improvements to local roads. I ask Ministers in the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Department for Transport to do some joined-up thinking and improve connectivity, not just for Middlewich but for the region, by funding the bypass.

4.26 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called in this debate.

The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) mentioned the sugar tax, alongside the city's wonderful football team. The issue of burning off energy from sugar is important. In my constituency, diabetes is a concern. Eastleigh has the second most diabetes-related amputations, and many of my residents are concerned about plans for two new fast-food outlets and a car showroom on the site of the old council buildings and courts area. I ask the local council to reconsider whether, given the need for new homes, this brownfield planning application so close to two secondary schools is sensible.

That said, Eastleigh is a fit area. In fact, this weekend saw the 32nd Eastleigh 10k. Sadly, a toe injury put paid to my running this year—[*Laughter.*] I do not joke. I ran last year; it was much warmer then. Some 2,800 runners took part—a record field—and I enjoyed giving out the medals to the littler people after their 2k.

[Mims Davies]

The women's was a fast race. In fact, it was a women's record, with Laura Whittle recording a time of 32 minutes, which is about how long it takes me to run a 5k at the moment. I was really impressed. The race was once again covered by the excellent *Eastleigh News*. Steve and his team are local and loving it. They go to absolutely everything. They are a small gang of locally connected journalists who give the people of Eastleigh an opportunity to say what they feel, as was particularly the case with its coverage of the old council buildings.

It has been an extraordinary few months for the people of Eastleigh. After the election, we laid out our Conservative vision for the constituency, and I am enjoying holding the Liberal Democrat council and Ministers to account once again and making important points about local infrastructure. Our roads, like those of fellow MPs, are in dire need of investment. A focus on this is vital. Were Members to meet anyone from my constituency, they would hear about the never-ending traffic queues blighting the area. I am delighted to support the air pollution work in the House because areas such as Hamble lane and right outside the council buildings are places of air pollution concern. I will therefore be backing the air quality Bill.

We have heard about the local majors fund, which is very welcome in areas such as mine, where we have long been awaiting the Chickenhall link road. All MPs could probably argue over whose area has been waiting the longest for a bypass or link road, but we have been waiting 25-plus years for Chickenhall. Does anyone want to raise me? It was important, therefore, that that was mentioned in the Budget. It will unlock more prime land for economic growth, boost the area and continue the recent successes of Southampton airport. I was delighted to visit the airport this month in connection with the new route to Cork. It is just £29 from Southampton to Cork for a weekend; if anyone would like to join us, it is one of four new routes that Dave Lees and his team are bringing to the south coast. I am delighted to see this new road, alongside other manifesto promises, coming to fruition. We will see them delivered through this majority Conservative Government.

I made some local visits, including to Mount Industries earlier this week and to Aggregate Industries, at which we heard about the importance of jobs, infrastructure, dealing with air pollution and ensuring that we get the Conservative action we need. This will lead to more local jobs and better prosperity. Two different industries based around Chickenhall Lane mentioned the importance of the new road to them. Its inclusion in the Budget is a great boost to Eastleigh, and I am very proud to see this brought forward to the community, meeting our promise.

We have made progress, too, on the much needed Botley bypass, which has been in the pipeline since 1988. I am told that a planning application is imminent, and we have been working positively with the local enterprise partnership. I congratulate Botley parish council, which has done everything it can to get the diggers closer to the ground. I can tell Members that it has been a real local campaign, with the parish council and the local community doing something to make the Botley community better, alongside producing a local parish or neighbourhood plan. It is much needed when there are, frankly, none in my constituency. In 2012, the *Daily*

Echo reported that the Botley bypass would be shelved for another 20 years. I am thus delighted that, as a result of Conservatives working together with the LEP and Hampshire County Council, work on this site will soon commence. That just shows that when the people of Eastleigh vote blue, they get the investment, the roads—hopefully, two—and the jobs that the area needs.

We heard a lot in the Budget debate about the next generation, and jobs and prosperity are key to our young people being successful. I recently met at Eastleigh college during national apprenticeship week Ricky from KA Watts Plumbing; Paul from WH Rowe, a local aluminium foundry; Ashley from Gasworks, which carries out gas maintenance; and James from First Call Heating. The college is so successful at bringing forward so many apprenticeships. What we heard is that people are striving to work with some of the smaller businesses that are bringing forward really key apprenticeships, particularly in the foundry area.

One of the problems that blights our lives, even when it comes to delivering apprenticeships in Eastleigh, is good old health and safety rules. I take this opportunity to say that if we want to get our people work ready and give them the work experience, we must make sure that 16 and 17-year-olds get that opportunity to start out in a new career. The employers I met were very keen to see old apprentices given a new opportunity and the best chances.

Over the last few months, my constituency has seen some serious challenges. St Luke's surgery in Botley is hugely important to the community, but is now in crisis. I thank the Minister for Community and Social Care for meeting me—we have another meeting coming up—to discuss how to help sort out the GP problem in my constituency. People in Botley are waiting up to eight weeks for a regular appointment, which is clearly not good enough. St Luke's is understaffed and worried; it wants to provide a better service. Well resourced and well staffed local GPs are crucial parts of every community, and I am certainly fighting for St Luke's.

I want to thank my hon. Friends and others for their support and help on International Women's Day. We had a fantastic turnout of girls—73 of them—from across the country, who came to their Parliament for a day of events to raise awareness of inequality. It helped to motivate our youngsters to get campaigning. I was delighted to see what a diverse range of issues were raised.

Returning to more local issues, the lack of a local plan blights my local residents. I would like to thank the Stokes Residents Association in Bishopstoke, which is trying so hard to support the environment, keeping it rich and diverse and ensuring that there is no needless destruction, which is what happens when the brownfield sites in Eastleigh are ignored. It really is time for the Government to allow us to step in and impose plans in areas where legislation is not being used, in order to support residents' ideas.

This will not be a quiet Easter for me. I shall be attending the Eastleigh Lions Club fashion show; I shall be visiting and helping Angela Coaches, which is hoping to find larger premises; I shall be visiting Solent TV; I shall be enjoying a meeting with the Eastleigh Borough Council race and equality forum; I shall be heading to Age Concern Eastleigh, and visiting carers

at Voyage Care; I shall be touring the Swan shopping centre; and I shall be working with the Chandlers Ford women's register. I shall also be holding surgeries in Bursledon and Eastleigh, where I will hear from residents who are concerned about local sewerage issues such as flooding, and the impact on local services of the lack of a local plan.

It has been a delight to take part in this important debate. I wish you, Mr Speaker, and the whole House a restful Easter, and I promise to get many more Eastleigh campaigns into my questions when I return.

Mr Speaker: I call Melanie Onn.

4.35 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. This has come rather unexpectedly. I was still writing the introduction to my speech.

Let me begin by thanking the Deputy Leader of the House for the guidance and support that she has given me during my first few months in the role of shadow Deputy Leader of the House. She has assisted in discussions of such unusual matters as the arrest of Members, the Members' benevolent fund, vellum, and some of the vaguer operations of this place. Dare I mention English votes for English laws? Perhaps I should move on. Anyway, she performs her role with very good grace. Earlier today, she and I, along with our SNP equivalent—the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh)—were photographed to commemorate the first all-women business questions. We called the photograph “The Three Graces”.

We have had a fantastic debate this afternoon. It has been wide and varied, and a real treat. Many Members have come here to champion their constituencies. The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) referred to the 10-year delay in the provision of a lift at Stanmore station. I am sure that he will continue to campaign assiduously. I was interested in his “Thirty Nine Steps” reference. I wonder whether the book is about that station. The hon. Gentleman also talked about investment in Crossrail, and I felt that that was relevant to my own constituency. The hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) mentioned transport as well, drawing attention to the lack of mention of any future transport plan in the south Humber area. As for the £75 garden waste charge in Harrow, perhaps the hon. Member for Harrow East should relocate to north-east Lincolnshire, where the council charges only £30.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about Equitable Life. I took part in the debate that he initiated, speaking in support of my constituents who lost out as a result of the scandal. I wonder whether his views on Equitable Life reflect his views on the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign. Those women, also through no fault of their own, are losing out financially and in terms of their quality of life. I think that parallels can be drawn.

Much has been said today about potholes, road quality, bypasses, link roads and the like. It was interesting to hear my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) issue a plea to his own Member of Parliament in London for assistance in improving the roads in that area. Most striking, however, was his mention of the first anniversary of the conflict in

Yemen, and the atrocities that have affected 8,800 civilians so terribly. The fact that 3 million children are not going to school reaffirms the importance of our international development fund. The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned the Tiffin cup, which I think is well known throughout the House. I shall certainly be speaking to the proprietors of the Spice of Life and Masala Indian in Great Grimsby, and seeking their participation.

My right hon. Friend mentioned Leicester football club. Leicester Tigers gives rugby training to young people in community classes. The team will be slightly closer to my constituency in the summer—at Market Rasen, in Lincolnshire—and I believe that my son will be joining in that activity.

The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) is certainly standing up for his constituents over National Express. He could never be accused of failing to stand up for his constituents in this place, and I am sure that they expect nothing less. It was interesting to hear that he is trying to establish an alternative city of culture. He might not be aware that I have been trying to bring next year's city of culture slightly south of the Humber towards Grimsby and Cleethorpes to get some of the benefits that the Hull city of culture will enjoy. The citizens of Hull have not been too impressed with my attempts, but I would be happy to pass the hon. Gentleman's details on to them. Perhaps they will contact him rather more frequently than they are contacting me at the moment.

It was interesting to hear about the health summits. I wonder whether some of the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised relate to the fragmentation of the NHS and the increasing privatisation within our health services. If that were not happening so quickly, perhaps those health summits would not be necessary. I entirely recognise his support for the world humanitarian summit, for the Queen's 90th birthday celebrations and the keep Britain tidy and Clean for the Queen activities. One of my own councillors in the Freshney ward actively participated in that event to support keeping Britain tidy.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) highlighted some terrible tangles of bureaucracy. These things could be so simple, and I really hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will pass that message on to the relevant Minister. I have to believe that the Minister will want to assist in the matter more thoroughly than is currently the case.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) on winning pier of the year, and I thank him for mentioning the fact that Grimsby Town will be coming to Wembley for the FA Trophy. We have an incredibly strong contingent of away fans, and I am sure that Wembley will be delighted to see such an influx of Grimsby residents coming to London to support their team. I hope that we will win and that we will not have to be subjected to the terrors of a penalty shoot-out, which do not serve us well.

The hon. Gentleman was also right to raise the issue of transport. I know that he has reprised his role on the Transport Select Committee, and that he is a considerable enthusiast for the railways, particularly in our area. He has been an assiduous campaigner on that front. I personally raised the issue of the lack of consideration for transport in the area south of the Humber with the chief executive of Transport for the North at this week's meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on Yorkshire

[Melanie Onn]

and North Lincolnshire. I thoroughly support the suggestion that there should be a direct train from Cleethorpes and Grimsby down to King's Cross. Also, the state of the road on the A180 means that I am completely unable to hear our local radio station, Compass FM, over the rumble. We really need to get on with sorting that out.

The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) discussed the important issues of freezing pensions and the uprating for UK citizens living overseas. He also talked about the impact of Brexit, were that to happen, and I support his call for a debate on that matter.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) expressed his concern over the potential loss of important sporting facilities in his constituency. I wish his campaign to retain those facilities well. His constituents are clearly very active people. I also recognise his tributes to local NHS staff.

The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) raised the important issue of the Middlewich eastern bypass. She is clearly a keen advocate for the issues affecting that area of her constituency. I was particularly impressed by your recollection of all the roads and interchanges, which demonstrated your intimate knowledge of your constituency—

Mr Speaker: Order. I have no knowledge of these matters myself. I think I know what the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) was driving at. She was referring to the knowledge being demonstrated by the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce).

Melanie Onn: I am terribly sorry, Mr Speaker. Yes, I meant the hon. Lady's constituency, not yours. I am sure you have absolutely no knowledge of Congleton's roads. I do apologise.

The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) mentioned the celebration of the 32nd running of the Eastleigh 10k. I am sorry that she did not get to participate this time. I also want to highlight the Great Grimsby 10k on 31 July, in which local companies and charities will be taking part, and I am sure that she recognises that event similarly. I heard her comments about the roads that need investment, her air pollution concerns and her support for and involvement in International Women's Day, when an impressive number of her constituents attended this place.

Finally, I want to take the opportunity, which I failed to do this morning, to wish everybody a very Happy Easter.

4.45 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to be back at the Dispatch Box for the second time today to help Back Benchers from all parties in their quest to represent their constituents.

I particularly commend the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams), whose birthday it is today. That he is here shows his dedication. My hon. Friends the Members for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) will also be celebrating their birthdays over the weekend.

I welcome the return of the pre-recess Adjournment debate—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] It is a splendid tradition and I am delighted that people can come here and raise a wide variety of issues. It was ably started by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), affectionately known as Bobbhai. He is one of several apprentices to my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West in that he tried to cover as many topics as possible. He will recognise that the lift at Stanmore station is a matter for the Mayor of London, our hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), and Transport for London. I understand that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has raised the concern with TfL many times, so I suggest that he grabs the Mayor in the Lobby when we vote on the Finance Bill on the Monday we return. The station's ramp for wheelchair users technically meets the requirements for step-free access, but I appreciate that it is steep.

My hon. Friend was right to praise the redevelopment of the Royal National Orthopaedic hospital, which does great work. I understand that the trust's board will, I hope, approve the plans, which will then be submitted to NHS Improvement for review. It is very much a priority project for the Department of Health and NHS Improvement. I was pleased that he paid tribute to the rebuilding of several schools; it is good to see that the Government are investing in the future of children in Harrow. He made particular reference to the first voluntary-aided Hindu school, which parents will welcome.

My hon. Friend also talked about the blue badge scheme. The criteria for obtaining a blue badge have been tightened significantly. It is not based on a particular kind of disability, but if someone's disability means that they cannot walk a certain distance and their walking is sufficiently affected, they should be deemed eligible. I am sure that he will work with his constituents on that.

As for the tobacco tax, the price of a typical pack of cigarettes already contains over £5 in duty. In Budget 2014, it was announced that the escalator of RPI plus 2% would continue into this Parliament. The Treasury is also taking action to reduce the gap in duty between hand-rolling tobacco and cigarettes. I am sure that my hon. Friend will welcome both those measures because high duty rates are a proven way of reducing the prevalence of smoking and help to meet the objectives of protecting public health.

The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) mentioned Yemen, which certainly matters to this country. The emerging Daesh in Yemen and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula are exploiting the current situation. The Government are not prepared to stand back and let that continue, but they believe that a political solution is the best way of bringing long-term stability to Yemen. There are encouraging reports of co-operation between the Saudis and the Houthis, who have agreed a cessation of hostilities on the Saudi-Yemen border, improved humanitarian access, prisoner exchanges and mine clearance. Last week, the Saudi Arabian-led coalition said that it intended to scale back military operations in Yemen. In the same vein, I applaud and support the work of the UN special envoy for Yemen, who says that he is ready to relaunch political talks in the coming weeks. The UK effort should be focused on supporting the UN, and encouraging the parties to engage constructively and implement the commitments made.

The right hon. Gentleman also referred to aspects of the sugar tax and the availability of products in this place, and I suggest that he may want speak to the Administration Committee. I am sure that there are a lot of cheers for the momentous season that the Leicester City foxes have had so far, and I am sure they would be a popular winner of the premier league if they were able to continue their great success. I have to say that they are doing much better than my team, Liverpool. He referred to a specific situation relating to diabetes programmes in Leicester. I am not aware of the details of that, but I am sure he is capable, as he has shown in the past, of taking that up appropriately with the Health Secretary. May I also congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on the Tiffin cup? This is the first year that I will be making a nomination, and I hope we will be successful.

Let me move on to the tour de force that is my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West. He is a class act, and other Members are starting to learn from him. He finished his contribution with a tribute to Her Majesty the Queen in the year of her 90th birthday. I can assure him that there will be ample time in this House to pay tributes in due course, but activities such as Clean for the Queen have been very successful.

On c2c, the Government accept that the December timetable changes have had a big impact on c2c passengers and their journeys. As my hon. Friend said, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), who has responsibility for rail, asked c2c to undertake a review of the stopping pattern of the services into London. I want to assure him that officials in the Department for Transport will continue to work closely with c2c to ensure that appropriate changes are delivered and that an appropriate balance is achieved in respect of crowding and service levels.

On fire safety, the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (James Wharton) wrote to my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West recently, explaining that he is considering a number of the issues that he had raised about building regulations. I am also pleased that he has had the chance to speak to the Minister for Schools about automatic fire sprinklers in schools.

I am aware of the concerns my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West has about the potential change in responsibilities involving police and crime commissioners, but I want him to be assured that those matters will be considered carefully if any changes are made. On Chilcot, we have all been waiting a long time for that report, and I hope it will not be too much longer before we have it. Sir John Chilcot and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister exchanged letters in October. My hon. Friend will be aware that my right hon. Friend is exceptionally frustrated at how long this has taken, but it is an independent inquiry and an independent report, and the Government cannot direct when it will be published.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West on piloting a private Member's Bill successfully through this House. It just shows that a good, sensible piece of legislation that does not try to achieve too much but does something that matters can successfully gain the support of the House. In this case, it was a deregulatory measure and I wish it well in the Lords, with the hope that it will receive Royal Assent.

On the alternative city of culture, I think that, as has already been alluded to, Grimsby is trying to become the fringe zone for it—I think it is stretching it a little far in terms of getting to Southend. Knowing my hon. Friend and the people of Southend, they will not let anything stand in the way. It sounds as if they have a really exciting programme, which I may well take advantage of next year. I am hoping to go to Southend in the near future—I must admit that it will be to campaign for my friend Alex Bright, who is running in the Southchurch ward. I say friend, as he is that, but he also works for me as my secretary, and I am sure he will do well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West has a long history of championing animal welfare, and he will be aware that there are already laws in place that enforcement agencies can use to ensure the welfare of pet animals. However, the Government accept that the legislation needs updating, and there has been a consultation, to which we received about 1,500 responses. They will have to be analysed before any decisions are made, but this is not just about changing the law; it is also about working with key stakeholders to improve people's understanding. He then tackled a number of issues connected with health, including the health summits. I should point out that the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency is the competent authority in this area, and although the Government may wish to encourage particular thoughts along certain lines, the agency is independent and needs to come up with appropriate evidence.

On salt, the data published this week by Public Health England showed that adult salt intake in England has decreased by more than 10% in the past decade. My hon. Friend is right that the UK is leading the world on salt reduction, and I will work with industry on voluntary reductions in salt levels by up to 50% in everyday products, such as ketchup, bread and baked beans.

On meningitis, my thoughts are with the family of my hon. Friend's constituent. I recognise that this is a serious disease. He referred to the e-petition, and I know that the matter will be debated further in April.

Fuel poverty is a really important matter, and I recognise that my hon. Friend piloted a private Member's Bill on to the statute book when he was in Opposition some years ago. The Government are serious about helping vulnerable people to heat their homes, and the Department is putting in place measures that are needed to meet our ambitious target for fuel poverty, requiring us to bring as many fuel-poor homes as reasonably practicable up to the band C energy efficiency standard by 2030.

My hon. Friend was right to praise what happened in the Budget on business rates. With regard to the Maldives, the UK is not alone in its concern about the sustained decline of democracy and judicial independence, but I am sure that he will make his points directly to the Minister.

The upcoming world humanitarian summit will provide a once-in-a-generation opportunity for the global community to come together and agree on how to serve those most left behind by conflict, extreme poverty and environmental change. My right hon. Friend the International Development Secretary has placed support for women and girls at the heart of her Department's work, and the UK supports proposals to ensure that women are involved in planning and decision making during responses to humanitarian emergencies.

[*Dr Thérèse Coffey*]

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) raised a challenging case. I will not pretend that I can give him any assurances here today, but I will refer the matter to the Home Secretary to see whether there is anything that can be done.

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) and the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) will be going down Wembley Way together singing, “We’re on our way to Wembley”. He referred to the Greater Lincolnshire deal and Transport for the North. I think that there is a real opportunity with that devolution deal to make some of the changes to which he refers. I recognise his points about rail connectivity, and he was generous in accepting that work will be undertaken on the A160 and the A180, which will help Immingham, but I will pass his comments to the Department for Transport and ask Ministers there to reply.

The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) referred to early-day motion 1235. I am not aware that the usual channels have yet been activated for a debate on the statutory instrument to which he refers, so he may wish to take that up with the hon. Member for Angus (Mike Weir), who also has a birthday today. Specifically, UK state pensions are payable worldwide and uprated abroad where we have a legal requirement to do so—for example in the European economic area or in countries in which there are reciprocal agreements. That has been a long-standing policy of successive Governments for about 70 years, and the Government have no plans to change the policy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) started with a strong proclamation of his Christian faith. I want to flag up the fact that I am delighted that he and his colleagues on the International Development Committee had a successful visit to Nigeria. DFID is committed to drawing 1 million more children into education in northern Nigeria by 2020. He referred to the sports fields at Shugborough Hall. He should recognise that Sport England is a statutory consultee on all planning applications affecting playing fields, and he may wish to approach it himself. In relation to the Hopton tunnel, there is a proposal to replace it with a false cutting. When compared with the green tunnel, the proposed false cutting would bring a substantial

reduction in the footprint required to construct and operate HS2, as well as a reduction in the height of the structure.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) was exceptionally eloquent in her proposals for an eastern bypass around Middlewich. It is good to hear that she is working with her council and the local enterprise partnership. She made a compelling case in her bid for the local majors fund, especially recognising the access to Crewe. She is due to meet the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (James Wharton), but I strongly recommend that she meets the Minister of State, Department for Transport. I hope that she succeeds in her compelling case for housing—as I hope that I will succeed in the case that I will put forward—[*Interruption.*] It is for the Suffolk Energy Gateway bypass.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) covered a wide range of topics. To get results, she urged people to vote blue to get green. She is right; she is an excellent MP, making that difference. She talked about apprenticeships, and I will pass on her comments to the appropriate Minister, and I know that she has already met my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health about GPs. In terms of International Women’s Day, it is right that she gets the credit.

Finally, it has been a pleasure working with the hon. Member for Great Grimsby, and I thank her for that. I thank all the civil servants for helping in this debate, and I wish everybody a happy Easter.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Whip to move the motion for the Adjournment debate, I want to place on the record my appreciation and, I hope, that of all Members of the House, of more than four decades’ service to it by Alda Barry, who is spending her last day in the Serjeant at Arms’s chair. Alda will leave the service of the House to retire, extraordinary though it might seem, at the end of this month. It has been a career of outstanding public service and, Alda, we want to record our thanks.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Charities: Veterans Care Sector

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

5 pm

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting me this debate on a subject on which I know I speak often. I beg patience from those who might understandably become slightly exasperated by my ongoing drive. Let me outline briefly why this subject is so important, why we must start to get this right now and, crucially, how we can get it right. I am not in the Chamber for the last debate before a recess simply to whine away.

I do not profess to be the brains behind the operation when it comes to addressing the role of charities in a sustainable future veterans care model. My thoughts are a coalescence of those of many individuals and teams who have served at the coalface, delivering programmes of care and transition to our servicemen and women, both civilian and serving. This is not about me and my personal experiences, although I clearly cannot disregard them. Furthermore, I am not precious about these proposed reforms. I encourage others to come forward and to challenge and contribute to the debate. That said, since I published the reforms in early January, they have been scrutinised by many in the profession. It has become clear that they are a set of reforms that the service charity community and, crucially, the service charity users, can really coalesce around. I ask the Minister and his Department to consider my remarks in that context.

Charities have for more than a century been the mainstay of the provision and offer to servicemen and women returning from operations. There were just a few to start with, born in the aftermath of the first world war, in response to the sheer number of veterans and service personnel returning from that conflict. Through the decades, these charities have slowly but surely expanded to provide more and more whole-care, wraparound packages for our servicemen and women, who find returning to these shores a struggle.

Let me say now, at the outset, that we must stick to the truth about those whom the sector is set up to benefit. The vast majority of veterans settle and transition from wartime operations perhaps changed by their experiences but able to adapt and cope. Veterans are not victims, they are not dangerous and they seek no advantage or favourable treatment or, in particular, sympathy. In fact, a veteran will usually be the last to complain about their treatment and the last to seek to blame.

Against this burgeoning charitable provision in the last century, the state was happy to take a back seat, content to allow the sector to soak up the problem of veterans care. In some ways, this was understandable. Intense conflict was not a regular occurrence, veterans care needs are complex and long term and, I am afraid, the bald truth is that there are few votes in getting veterans care right. However, I think it would be fair to say that this century has seen a marked change in the scale and complexity of veterans care in the United Kingdom.

In 2003, this House decided to go to war in Iraq. This was swiftly followed by significant expansion of the British effort in Afghanistan to include the now notorious

Helmand Province. In Afghanistan, we walked into the most intense ground combat seen by the British Army since Korea in the '50s. The numbers of troops that those two conflicts required combined with the increasing survivability of soldiers on the battlefield saw an explosion in the demand for the services of veterans care charities.

Against that scene, I decided to try to win a place in this House to be their voice, because I believe we can do it. We can deliver better for our veterans. It is not “us” to allow our veterans to become embittered, desperate or discarded. It is not in keeping with the debt that this nation owes those individuals. It is not British. It is not the British Army’s way of doing things. We look after our people; we do our duty by them, as they have done their duty by us. And crucially, we do not just talk a good game on this; we actually make sure it happens.

I have made it my mission in this place to understand as much as possible about the system as it currently stands. I have spent hundreds of hours, in this first year, meeting and visiting veterans, service providers and armed forces communities. I wanted to layer that knowledge on to my personal experience: I had recently made the transition from military service; I had seen many friends attempt to find help unsuccessfully; and I knew of the dark battles that some of my own men face daily in their minds. For the Government of the day, veterans care, like a lot of things, was not part of the plan for Iraq or Afghanistan.

Set against an increasingly desperate narrative of shocking cases of care, and against a complete vacuum of provision of this type of care by those who had asked our servicemen and women to do their bidding, the great British public stepped up. Help for Heroes and other charities like it were born. They were born out of the gratitude that said simply, “The boys deserve better than this. If the state won’t do it, we will.” Those service charities have been the saviours of many lives—the lives of those whose comrades fought to keep them alive on the battlefield, lives remarkably preserved in Iraq and Afghanistan, but who have found their hardest battles within the relative safety of the United Kingdom.

I cannot speak highly enough of those groups for what they have done. They have stepped up and delivered that duty of care that every commander, at any level in the UK military, feels towards the men and women they command. It is one of life’s deepest privileges to command men in war. Those of us who fought and bled with them will remain forever in the debt of these service charities for the fact that they carried on that duty on our behalf.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate, and I wonder whether he would allow me, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on eye health and visual impairment, to highlight the brilliant work of Blind Veterans UK, which empowers visually impaired veterans to live independent lives following their selfless service.

Johnny Mercer: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I really mean what I say: these groups really stepped up and delivered what was needed for our armed forces veterans, when there were no other options. It was that very British way of coming together and dealing with that that made some of us so proud.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I really do congratulate my hon. Friend on his impassioned speech, and on his research. I, too, would like to say that we must remember the families of the veterans. I pay tribute to Go Commando, the charity in my constituency, which does so much for veterans. The families left at home have raised money to do such good work for 40 Commando and all the marines and their families, to give them holidays and days out, and to give them children's centres and help and support.

Johnny Mercer: Yes, it comes back to what I said about these groups, which, often out of a sense of duty, or as a result of identifying a gap in their local area, just step up and do it, for no other reason than to deliver care to our servicemen and women. We are very lucky to have that as a country.

Over the years, matched by this gratitude in many of us, there grew an increasing bewilderment at the MOD's reticence to genuinely commit to the care of our men and women when they return home. I say "genuinely commit" carefully. Efforts have been made—of that there can be no doubt, but the truth is that we must measure the success of those efforts not simply by what we have put into them, but by the experience of those going through the system, readjusting to life after service, or finding a suitable quality of care for complex injuries suffered on the battlefield.

Now is the time to do this. In 2014, the UK ended combat operations in Afghanistan. That ended over a decade of two very intense and very public conflicts, which inspired the great British public to donate. Those days are now gone and we will not see them return anytime soon, such is the global political appetite for large-scale interventions of that type. This end of public operations and subsequent awareness of it, is conversely matched by a huge increase in demand for veterans services across the United Kingdom. In just the past year, referrals to Combat Stress went up 28%. The hidden wounds programme run by Help for Heroes has seen 500 referrals from a standing start a year ago. Regrettably, there is little evidence of a Government Department attempting to gauge the true scale of the needs of the veteran, serving and military family community as a whole. Nor is there evidence that the Government are trying to track progress against that need. How do we, as a nation, know, year on year, whether we are doing a good job or a bad one in this area? There were no universal measures of lives rebuilt or lives yet to be rebuilt that accommodate the good work that is already being done by the Ministry of Defence, the NHS, the Department for Work and Pensions, charities, British businesses and volunteers. Without strategic and structured measures implemented in a timely manner, therefore, a lack of action now will ultimately cost the nation more in the future in terms of the healthcare we offer to our veterans and their families and the finance required to maintain a fundamentally unsustainable model.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on highlighting an important national resource that may be going to waste. Today in this House we said goodbye to Principal Doorkeeper Milburn Talbot, who served in the Royal Navy and served this House with great distinction. There are many, many other veterans who transition

very capably. For those who need a little extra help, is this not an investment in the whole country, not just in veterans?

Johnny Mercer: Absolutely. I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. I shall not stray from the lane of this debate, but across the public service we have a special asset in individuals who commit themselves to public service and sacrifice their family life for the nation. If we do not look after them properly, that will eventually go. We need to make sure we get that right.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I agree with everything my hon. Friend has said, particularly his words about the Help for Heroes charity. I had the privilege of being the president of the Royal British Legion in Leigh-on-Sea. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating the army of volunteers who do so much to raise money to make sure that we look after our retired servicewomen and men?

Johnny Mercer: Of course. I cannot highlight enough what those volunteers have done, with no financial or selfish reward, but from a sense of duty to the country and to our servicemen and women. We must look after that. If we do not cultivate and protect it, I fear that over the years it will die out.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Before my hon. and gallant Friend resumes his main narrative, may I thank him for the vigour that he brings to these issues on the Defence Committee and to other issues that we examine as well? What is his view on the sheer numbers of service charities and the difficulties of co-ordinating their efforts? I am thinking of the huge variety, from post-first world war charities such as Veterans Aid in Victoria to very modern ones such as the adventurous Pilgrim Bandits in Hampshire, where special forces take grievously injured service personnel on adventure treks to the mountains and rivers of Canada, for example? How do we bring all this effort together when there are so many actors in the field?

Johnny Mercer: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. I will address precisely that point in about two or three minutes' time.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that local authorities must play a part in co-ordinating local charity work and supporting veteran care so that we ensure that our councils work with the armed forces covenant properly to produce tangible local results?

Johnny Mercer: I could not agree more that local and national Government should be involved in delivering that. We need to be careful about the involvement of local elected officials in veterans care. There is nothing political about veterans. It is a national issue and one that I wrestle with in Plymouth. We need to make sure that we stay in the lane of delivering a service for veterans, and the local professional side of the council is well placed to do that.

To sum up, the individuals who are suffering most from the changing tides in the debate are the blokes. Too many are falling short. Too many struggle to access care. Every weekend another case is reported in the Sunday papers. While the national debate moves on to

Europe, national security, the deficit and other important issues, those soldiers' lives stand still, awaiting an intervention by somebody who cares. They are the lucky ones: their stories got in the paper, and they inevitably get helped by that knight in shining armour—the Great British public. However, for every one of them, there are many who do not get helped.

What is it really like for someone to be two or three years out of the Army—holding down a civilian job and providing for their family—when they start hitting rougher waters, and the thoughts just will not leave them alone? Where do they go? To whom do they turn? Do they self-refer to a charity and hope for the best? How do they know that it provides care that works? How do they know that it is professional? What happens if the course of treatment it provides does not work? Who will help them through the process? Who really cares?

The pre-Christmas report by the Ministry of Defence on the armed forces covenant made wide reference to what is going into the arena of military support, and that is to be commended. However, the report fails to provide any meaningful statistical reference to the single most important measure of success: what our military community got out of that support. The single biggest shift in mindset that must be achieved is about reconfiguring services around users.

There are problems: waiting times are simply too long; there are distinct regional variations in the services available; there is a huge challenge to veterans navigating a complex set of unclear treatment pathways; and there is a lack of regulation of the quality and efficacy of the treatments being provided by some, with some of the more unscrupulous outfits still receiving Government finance. The truth is that our veterans today use an array of treatments, which vary wildly in effectiveness, professionalism, access points and delivery, and that is especially so with mental healthcare.

I hope I have outlined why this debate is so important and so timely, and why it is tough for those of us who have been through these wars to let go of this issue, for which I am afraid I make no apology. I therefore want to add to the debate—to offer a solution to the Government so that we can get this issue right. I want the Prime Minister, who has always understood this issue, to accept that getting it right in this Parliament is part of his legacy, and I know that he does accept that. Chiefly, however, I want the MOD to really understand the challenge we face in getting this issue right now, and I make that appeal to the MOD today. There will always be better times to reform; there will always be opportunities to duck difficult issues because of the lack of a 100% solution; and there will always be those who have lost focus on who is at the centre of these services—the men and women to whom we owe so much.

How do we fix this? Users should be able to choose the service they wish, but they should be provided with unbiased assistance and helped to navigate their way through a highly complex array of services. We must be realistic in our reform. Currently, many of these services are not evidence-based, and some appear, unhelpfully, to compete for business, while a few are even unsafe or unethical in their approach.

If we are to produce the first-class service that the military service community and, indeed, the nation—having committed so much of its own money—deserve, wide-reaching but fair reform will be needed. That reform

must be focused exclusively on the key principles of the following four streams: evidence-based treatment; a cultural shift, with the aim of creating not good veterans, but good citizens who have served; a service configured singularly around the service user, which will include service families; and clear and accessible care pathways.

It is worth noting at this stage that a sustainable model of future veterans care and support in this country cannot simply be modelled on how other nations have done this. We face a similar but subtler challenge in the UK, given our cultural and societal perceptions of serving and retired military service personnel and their families. Let me repeat that key point: veterans care must be singularly and exclusively configured around the needs of the user, with ease of access and dedicated casework management, rather than just signposting, at its core.

What do those four points look like in a little more detail? The future actually looks very similar to the present, but with key organisational, control and attitude changes. We are not looking at a huge demand or fiscal commitment to get this right. The Government must step up and take command of the national veterans challenge. Ultimately, it is the nation's responsibility to care for our servicemen and women, and that must be realised.

The Government's role in all this would be clear. They would provide access to service records. They would ensure there was a uniform access process across all providers, taking responsibility for a single point of contact. They would need independently to control the impartial case management of individuals, which would be focused entirely around individuals and their specific needs, which must be met. The Government must commit to providing interoperable case-management software and access to, or information about, NHS and other care providers' data. Chiefly, however, they must accept some sort of legal responsibility for ensuring that there is that care pathway. The actual delivery of services would remain with the current providers across the charitable and NHS sectors.

What sort of reform is needed in the service charity sector? With our young men and women potentially at vulnerable stages in their lives, approaching almost anyone who can claim to provide a service, there can be no doubt that we need some sort of regulation—with a small "r"—of our service providers, which is something only the Government can do. It is not good enough to ask the veteran to shop around and bounce from charity to charity without resolving his issues. Too much has already gone into the system: too much time has been invested and too many cases have been exposed to allow that to continue.

I and everyone else in the sector are clear: nobody can tell a charity what to do—that is not what these reforms are about—but it would be naive to suggest that the entire sector is optimised at present to deliver care for veterans, which is a nation's responsibility. With more than 2,500 military charities and funds, it is not realistic to suggest that there is no duplication, waste, bad practice or financial misdemeanours.

Tom Tugendhat: My hon. Friend is, rightly, speaking passionately about military charities. I know I can speak today without fear of opposition about the fact that many charities have tried to come together at

[Tom Tugendhat]

various points. Indeed, when I served in the Ministry of Defence and worked under General Richards, the then Chief of the Defence Staff, efforts were made to bring them together. There is, however, opposition to streamlining in many areas when so many different charities seek to fulfil a role in our society.

Johnny Mercer: Absolutely. This is the nub of the challenge when it comes to military charities and funds: how do we go about getting everyone to pull in the same direction? Some service providers need to consider whether they are exclusively configured around the user for whom they were originally set up to serve. Only a robust, dedicated and strong leadership team is capable of having that conversation, but I hold out hope that, with a vision of single-minded delivery in an increasingly challenging environment, charities can come together to identify their individual but equally special roles in the veterans care pathway and work together better as part of a greater machine and a greater cause than just their own. That requires leadership, including from the Government, but that will not happen unless we make a conscious move to provide it.

In my view, all groups that wish to provide a veterans' service of any kind and raise money for anything related to veterans care, be it palliative or holistic, should be required by law to be part of an approved group, perhaps along the lines of Cobseo—the Confederation of Service Charities—but with teeth. In order to gain access to that group, service providers should adhere to a basic set of agreed standards on their suitability. Those standards could include showing a clear practice of evidence-based treatment, outcomes, a complaints system, independent financial oversight by a board of trustees, and refusal to accept individual cases that do not come through a single and agreed point of contact.

I am going to start wrapping up, because I want to give the Minister time to reply. I hope the House forgives me for going on for longer than I wanted to, but I wanted to take as many interventions as possible.

In summary, now is the time to get this right. The truth is that other allies are treating their veterans better than we are, and that cannot be right. We have this ever-closing window of opportunity. We owe it to this current warrior generation, who, like so many before us, gave the best years of our lives willingly in service of the nation, hoping that we would not be disadvantaged for doing so. The Conservative Government can deliver that, but current structures need to be reconfigured. A department for veterans affairs would be a huge step forward, but it must be given the cost-departmental authority required to deliver those changes. Veterans care is a multi-agency operation within Government. At the very least, the veterans Minister must have that cross-departmental authority.

Finally, I pay tribute to the veterans Minister, with whom I have worked closely on this area. He has achieved much already and I am sure that he will continue to do so throughout this Parliament, but the truth is that he has no cross-departmental mandate or resource to empower him, or a clearly identified budget. In the United States, the Veterans Administration budget for 2015 was more than £160 billion.

This Government have done more in this cause than any previous Government. That is unarguable. We have made real progress, but there is some way to go—there really is. This Prime Minister presents us with an opportunity to get this right for my generation. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to bring this issue before the House.

5.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): Let me start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) on securing this debate. I shall be honest from the start and say that, in the six minutes I have to reply to the debate, I will not, unfortunately, be able to respond to every point that has been raised. I agree with him: it is absolutely right that he spent his time articulating the case and allowing other hon. Friends to contribute. Perhaps we can pick up some of the detail at another time. Since arriving in the House, he has made it his mission to campaign on behalf of veterans, and he has already forged a strong reputation as a champion of ex-service personnel. That reputation was cemented by the excellent report he presented to the Prime Minister earlier this year. Indeed, we should expect nothing less from a former officer of the Royal Regiment of Artillery.

Today is also an opportunity to pay tribute to veterans. This year, we mark a series of major anniversaries, a century on from Jutland and the Somme and some 25 years on from the first Gulf war. Such momentous occasions remind us of the extraordinary service and sacrifice of our soldiers, sailors and airmen. Those heroes were willing to put their lives on the line to defend our nation. That only underlines our responsibility to all our brave veterans, of whom there are some 2.8 million in this country. We must ensure that their transition to civilian life is as smooth as possible.

The majority of service personnel go on to enjoy a successful second career or, indeed, a well-earned retirement, but, sadly, as we have heard today, there are some who fall on hard times. Although the Ministry of Defence takes its responsibility to address needs arising from service very seriously, charities fill a void. They play a vital role in supporting wider welfare requirements, providing everything from housing to healthcare and helping wounded, injured and sick personnel back on the road to recovery. They prevent vulnerable individuals, some of whom leave service early, from falling through the cracks.

With 12,000 to 20,000 individuals leaving the UK armed forces every year and the world becoming a much more dangerous place, as the terrible Brussels attacks this week remind us, we will inevitably demand more from our people. That means that the work of the voluntary sector will become even more important, but charities are under serious pressure, not just from the scrutiny of their governance procedures, but from a decline in charitable giving. That is a direct consequence of the end of our enduring combat campaigns, which acted as a significant recruiting sergeant.

The Government would not ask our great voluntary sector to take on more responsibility without giving more power to its elbow, so we are helping out in three ways. The first is funding. In last week's Budget, my

right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced that £45 million of banking fines would be allocated over the next four years to support military charities. That includes £500,000 for CAIS Wales to fund its Change Step veteran services, which help veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder and a range of psychosocial problems to make positive changes to their lives. There is also £2.7 million for Royal British Legion Industries to help to fund its six care homes, which cater for ex-servicemen and women and their partners.

The second way in which we are helping is leadership. The MOD is providing critical support to the sector. Armed forces charities' employees, many of whom give their time for free, do an incredible job. However, in tough times charities need to do more to pool effort, minimise duplication and make the most of their resources. There is plenty of scope in that respect. It is worth reminding the House that the military charity sector is as broad as it is complex. We are all familiar with household names such as the Royal British Legion, SSAFA and Help for Heroes. According to the 2014 Directory of Social Change online guide to service charities, however, there are more than 2,200 registered military charities, such as Blind Veterans UK and Go Commando, which were rightly mentioned by my hon. Friends.

We have been supporting organisations such as Cobseo, an umbrella organisation for 250 charities, in their critical cluster work. Cobseo is bringing more coherence to the sector by having members work together, as I saw for myself when I recently attended a housing cluster meeting. It is expanding the evidence base on the big issues that affect veterans at various stages of their lives, from better employment opportunities to residential care homes. We have recently given it almost £500,000 to intensify its efforts. Like my hon. Friend, we believe that common standards will help to focus charities' activities and ensure a greater consistency of service across the country. We know that some smaller charities exist purely to satisfy a niche requirement in some areas of the country, but for the more established charities, we encourage membership of Cobseo.

The third way in which we are helping is through greater collaboration. My hon. Friend and I agree that there is also a need for the Government to do more. The

needs of veterans straddle Whitehall boundaries and national borders. They take in the MOD, the NHS, local authorities and our devolved Administrations. At times, the arrangement is unwieldy and unnecessarily bureaucratic.

Yet, while we agree on the ends, we do not necessarily agree on the means. My hon. Friend believes that we should have a Ministry for veterans, but on balance I do not believe, having considered the idea carefully, that it is the best way forward. That is primarily because it would duplicate what already exists. As Lord Ashcroft has said, a veterans agency would be a cross-Government agency. Yet we already have cross-Government support from the Department of Health, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Communities and Local Government, as well as other Departments. We also already have the DBS—Defence Business Services—Veterans UK, which, while focusing on pensions, compensation, and welfare support, works in the same way.

Above all, we are now using the armed forces covenant, which is designed to stop members of the armed forces family facing disadvantage, as a mechanism to join the dots between services. The covenant is backed not only by a £10 million annual fund, but by a clear governance structure. We have a three-star covenant reference group, chaired by the Cabinet Office, which co-ordinates delivery of the covenant for Her Majesty's Government. It brings together all relevant Departments and devolved Administrations in a way that a single agency or Ministry could not. We have a ministerial committee on the covenant chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and each year the Defence Secretary ensures that the MOD publishes an annual report to Parliament to communicate the delivery of our covenant commitments.

In my closing seconds, let me say that I find it deeply heartening that so many of my hon. Friends are in the Chamber for the last Adjournment debate before the recess. I hope that that demonstrates the commitment of this Parliament to our veterans.

Question put and agreed to.

5.30 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 24 March 2016

[MR ANDREW TURNER *in the Chair*]

NHS in London

1.30 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the NHS in London.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, and I thank the London Members from three different parties who supported my application.

Our consideration today of the NHS in London is timely because there are reorganisations—or reconfigurations, as they are called—going on all over the city. I will address on the situation in north-west London in particular. In Ealing, the NHS was the main issue in the election campaign, and it continues to be a preoccupation, as I can see in my inbox and postbag. I shall talk today about matters such as the junior doctors contract negotiations we hear so much about; A&E closures; changes in maternity and paediatrics, which affect us in Ealing; community pharmacies and some of the other allied services, such as optical services; and staff morale. I have several specific cases from my surgery, including those of whistleblowers. I have a constituent who was sacked and has been effectively blacklisted from NHS employment ever since exposing a bribe taking at Ealing hospital. I have raised her case three times on the Floor of the House, but nothing practical seems to be forthcoming for her.

There have been two important reports relating to the health service in north-west London. Most recently, the Independent Healthcare Commission for North West London, chaired by Michael Mansfield QC, was set up in response to the NHS's "Shaping a Healthier Future" programme to reshape hospital and out-of-hospital health and care services in north-west London. The proposals in "Shaping a Healthier Future" are euphemistically called changes, but they are actually cuts—we know what they really are—and they include nearly halving the number of hospitals in our local area with a proper 24-hour A&E service. There were nine, but that is going down to five.

The London Borough of Ealing is around the same size as cities such as Leeds, but it will have no properly functioning A&E services at a hospital. The nearest four hospitals to my constituency—Central Middlesex, Hammersmith, Ealing and Charing Cross—are set to be downgraded to minor hospitals with no A&E. Instead, there will be urgent care centres.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. She is obviously concerned about the loss of services in her constituency, as are other colleagues about theirs. Is it not true that many people, including my constituents, are concerned about the pressure on the remaining hospitals, such as West Middlesex University hospital, when all the surrounding hospital services are closing?

There is no guarantee that the remaining hospitals will have either the capital or the revenue funding they will need to cope with the inevitable increase in demand when services such as those at my hon. Friend's hospital close.

Dr Huq rose—

Mr Andrew Turner (in the Chair): Order. Before we continue, let me say that Members must abbreviate interventions.

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point that I believe deserved to be made at length. She anticipates a point I will come on to about the business case and the capacity problem. There is a problem with the way these things are organised. The north-west London area does not include West Middlesex hospital, which she mentioned, but that is more proximate to some parts of my constituency than Northwick Park hospital, to which my constituents are being diverted even though it is miles away. That just shows that people do not think in terms of these boundaries.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. My local A&E at Central Middlesex hospital, which was classified as good, was closed, and now the people from the poorest part of my constituency have to travel to the A&E at Northwick Park hospital, which was ill equipped and ill prepared for the closure of the Central Middlesex services and is often rated below par.

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend puts it very well. Ealing has also been hit by the closure. I have no hospitals within my constituency boundary, but Central Middlesex was one of the nearest. It was performing well and had had lots of investment—it was a brand new shiny thing. I used to be a hospital radio DJ there in the '80s. We were not allowed to play certain songs, including "My Way" by Frank Sinatra, because it is too much about the end for terminally ill people to listen to. Anyway, the hospital is now completely different from what it was like in the '80s. It is tragic that the A&E there is being downgraded in favour of Northwick Park.

I saw the Minister's brow furrow when I mentioned the boundaries. The hospital, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), is in south-west London. Perhaps we can think more creatively about crossing boundaries, because an ambulance will not usually take someone there even if it is nearer than Northwick Park. That was the point I was trying to make.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On the subject of thinking imaginatively, does the hon. Lady agree that it is important the Government recognise that if more joint working is to take place between, for example, the Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals Trust and the Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust—a proposal that I understand is being considered—capital funding might be needed to facilitate the process?

Dr Huq: Yes, I certainly do. I do not know the St Helier hospital well, but I believe it is renowned as a teaching hospital. The business plans must account for such things; there is often too much short-termism.

[Dr Huq]

The implementation of the closures listed is well under way. The A&E departments at Central Middlesex and Hammersmith shut their doors in September 2014, despite assurances from the Conservative party during the 2010 general election campaign that that would not happen. The closures have negatively affected waiting times at Northwick Park hospital in Harrow. That hospital is a considerable distance away from a lot of my constituents; as the crow flies, it is pretty far from East Acton to Harrow. I do not like to churn out loads of statistics, but Northwick Park does have the dubious distinction of the worst A&E waiting times on record in England—

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Huq: May I just finish this sentence? The partial sentence might not make as much sense as if I am allowed to complete it. In six out of the 15 weeks that immediately followed the closure, Northwick Park had the worst record in the country. There were anecdotal stories of ambulances backing up at that hospital.

Bob Blackman: I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate, but we must get to the facts of the matter, particularly when we refer to specific hospitals, their standards of performance and what they are achieving. It is true that before the opening of the new A&E at Northwick Park hospital, it had the worst record in London and one of the worst in the country, but since the new A&E opened in November 2014, it has had the best record in London and one of the best in the country.

Dr Huq: There is a target of 95% of patients being seen within four hours. Immediately following the closure, at that hospital the proportion was 53%. We should not just brush that away.

Bob Blackman: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Huq: I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman once. I want to finish because a lot of Members want to speak, so I shall crack on for the moment. We should not just brush these things under the carpet and say that they did not happen.

The Independent Healthcare Commission for North West London was set up because of the public distrust of the “Shaping a Healthier Future” programme, known among locals as “Shafting a Healthier Future” because it does not do what it says on the tin. One reason why it was further discredited by the Mansfield commission is that it was based on demographic forecasts from 2012 that massively underestimated the population in north-west London, which has increased at a much faster rate than was foreseen. Perhaps the Minister can clarify this, but there has been no clear indication that the programme has been adjusted to take account of those demographic changes.

Reforms have to make sense economically as well as clinically. Last week, we heard in the Budget about the continuing drive to control expenditure, but this ill-advised reorganisation seems to have been given a blank cheque. The Mansfield report states:

“There is no completed, up-to-date business plan in place that sets out the case for delivering the Shaping a Healthier Future...programme”.

There is nothing that demonstrates that the programme is affordable or deliverable, so serious question marks remain regarding its value for money. We are told that we are living in a time when every pound of taxpayers’ money spent has to be justified. Initially, the programme was supposed to deliver £1 billion of savings and cost £235 million, but the costs are ballooning. So far, there has been £1.3 billion of capital investment. Lots of that money has gone to external consultants such as McKinsey and on people’s jollies to America to see how it works there—quite a scary idea. The independent commission concluded that the likely return on the investment is insufficient, based on the strength of the existing evidence.

On the subject of finance, *The Independent* reported last year that London North West Healthcare NHS Trust warned its staff to limit their use of stationery and stamps, as it is aiming for a £88.3 million deficit this year, and it might miss even that target. Some 95% of NHS acute trusts, which run hospitals, were in deficit in the second quarter of this financial year. The hospital sector is heading for an overall £2.2 billion deficit this year. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) has warned that the £3.8 billion of extra funding for the NHS next year that was promised in the spending review is going to get lost in the black hole that has emerged in NHS finances; it will be swallowed up in all that debt.

I am a new MP, but since my election I have seen the maternity unit at Ealing hospital join the list of closed departments. That was one of the “Shaping a Healthier Future” recommendations.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con) *rose*—

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab) *rose*—

Dr Huq: Who is first? I give way to my hon. Friend; there are two of her.

Tulip Siddiq: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I apologise, because I have to run off in half an hour for an appointment at the Royal Free hospital’s maternity unit. The birth rate is the highest since the 1970s, yet maternity wards in London have been closing left, right and centre. Elizabeth Duff from the National Childbirth Trust has pointed out how disruptive that is to women’s pregnancy and labour. Will my hon. Friend share her experience of the closure of the maternity unit in her constituency?

Dr Huq: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent intervention, which is very pertinent to where she is going after this debate. As a mother who has been through these services, I know that it is massively disrupting if the goalposts are suddenly moved, causing people to travel for longer to get to their appointments. The closure of Ealing hospital’s maternity unit was called a consolidation. It was meant to be part of the centralisation of services, but it has had really adverse effects.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): Obviously, I will respond to the debate at the end. The hon. Lady is making a wide-ranging speech, but when she talks about adverse consequences, particularly in the context of maternity services, I urge her to give examples and to be careful about her language. We do not want to alarm people—particularly those who are accessing healthcare in her area—for the sake

of a rhetorical device. Particularly on Ealing's maternity unit, where there is now 24-hour consultant coverage, I urge her to be cautious in expressing herself.

Dr Huq: I thought interventions were not allowed to be lengthy.

Dawn Butler: On my hon. Friend's behalf, I thank the Minister for that intervention. The Government's language over the past few months, saying that we do not have a seven-day NHS, has been alarming and destabilising for a number of people, who have failed to attend services. Perhaps the Minister should take her own medicine.

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend puts it excellently. I have some figures that illustrate the adverse consequences. Ealing mums were promised access to 24/7 consultant cover—168 hours per week—for a better, safer service. That has not materialised. Eight months after the closure, the only hospital to come close to that figure is West Middlesex, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth—it is not even in north-west London. St Mary's has fallen short at 98 hours. Queen Charlotte's—the hospital where I was born, although it was somewhere else in those days—offers 116 hours; Chelsea and Westminster, 115 hours; Northwick Park, 108 hours; and Hillingdon, 112 hours. They all missed. There has been nothing concrete. Only on a wing and a prayer will they reach that nirvana any time soon. So much for a better service.

Paediatrics is next for the chop. On 30 June, there will be no children's wing at Ealing hospital. I have a lot of figures, but people are often numbed by statistics, and other Members want to speak. According to the Office for National Statistics' 2014 population estimates, Ealing is a very young borough—23.5% of the population is under the age of 18—so we need a children's wing.

It is worrying. People can be treated quickly and effectively for accident and emergency cases at Ealing hospital at the moment, but the consequence of the changes will be that ambulances will have to take people to Hillingdon and other places miles away. It is unclear who is going to fund that. A lot of those who are admitted to the children's wing are not taken in an ambulance; they come under their own steam. Will a nurse or a doctor accompany everyone who uses patient transport service, to ensure child safety? There are a lot of question marks.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): The hon. Lady is familiar with Kingston from having worked there. She knows that it is an excellent hospital with excellent community healthcare service provided by Your Healthcare. She is talking about additional funding for hospitals and acute trusts. Does she agree that, although the Government have provided £10 billion of additional funding for the NHS, it is important that money is not taken out of community services to prop up acute services, because community services are meant to keep people out of hospital?

Dr Huq: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point, and I would include community pharmacies among those community services. There is a lot of worry among pharmacists in my constituency.

Tom Brake: I wanted to make that point, too. It looks like up to one in four community pharmacies in my borough—a total of 11 pharmacies—are going to close.

That is a bizarre policy, given that the Government have rightly been pressing Members of Parliament to encourage our constituents to go to community pharmacies. Now they propose to close a large number of them.

Dr Huq: I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): On the issue of community services, to which the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) referred, my local clinical commissioning group is facing a 20% cut in its funding. It has to make savings of £20 million—a fifth of its income—so services that are meant to prevent people from going into tertiary healthcare are being depleted. The Minister said that we should not alarm people, but how do we hold the Government to account if not by bringing these issues to this House for debate?

Dr Huq: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We are trying to have a serious debate, but we are pooh-poohed at every turn. When my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) asked a question about the Mansfield report, he was told that he was living in a bygone age. I cannot recall the exact remark, but it was something like, "You're an old soldier fighting a war that's concluded." Dismissing people in that way does not inspire confidence.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I always do what I am told by my hon. Friend—the dismissive comment was that the Mansfield report was commissioned by five Labour councils. I have actually had a slightly more considered response, but it was still dismissive. It was a very serious independent report, and I am sure my hon. Friend will agree that the Minister should take it a bit more seriously.

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend puts it very well. People's concerns are serious and should not simply be dismissed.

I also agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) that the community pharmacy network is a vital component of our country's health and care system. Suddenly, the Government seem to be imposing arbitrary cuts in a high-value, easily accessed, community-based facility, which relies on private investment as well—pharmacists are small businesspeople. Hiten Patel of the Mattock Lane pharmacy opened my eyes when I spent a bit of time shadowing him there. I saw how the burden on the NHS and GPs is reduced by people having such pharmacies at the end of their street. For most people, they are much nearer than a hospital or even a GP service.

Hiten Patel and his staff help people to make lifestyle choices. They provide a range of services and information to promote health, wellbeing and self-care. They are a useful check on prescribing errors and are dedicated and trusted people. We have such pharmacies all over the country, and they form obvious back-up and support at a time of crisis for GP recruitment and retention. We should value those people, not make life more and more difficult for them.

Last Sunday, I collected my elderly mum's meds from Harbs pharmacy in South Ealing Road. That pharmacist is open out of hours. I recall that one year he was open even on 25 December—I did not go past this year,

[Dr Huq]

but he was probably open then as well. That releases the Ealing Park surgery practice next door for more acute and specialist care, but the Government seem to do short-termism. The long-term impact of eroding the network will have a disastrous effect.

Another troubleshooting service that is located at the heart of the community and has hidden value is opticians. They, too, have a valuable role of social contact, with networks and support mechanisms, and they can contribute to signposting and safeguarding the vulnerable. As the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) pointed out in connection with community pharmacists, opticians can also catch things early.

I visited the Hynes opticians in Northfield Avenue, where staff are worried about the continuity of their supply chain. Joint strategic needs assessments enable clinical commissioning groups and local authorities to work in tandem, and the Ealing Council assessment mentions effective eye services and sight loss, but the NHS Ealing CCG does not use the JSNA in its commissioning decisions. Will there be some guidance from the Minister about how to integrate CCGs and local authorities better?

I could go into mental health services, which are chronically underfunded and a huge cause for concern. The Prime Minister made a speech about them last month, but I would like to see more action. Labour has a shadow mental health services Minister. The chief executive of Central and North West London Foundation Trust, Claire Murdoch, has claimed in an interview that mental health can be an “easy target” at times of belt tightening, saying that

“during recessions mental health tends to be hit first and hardest and recover most slowly...There is an absolute anxiety that people are depressed and really are suffering as a result of some of the economic reforms. What we don’t know yet is the extent to which some of the welfare reforms are driving people to real, serious illness.”

I have the sense of morale taking a nosedive locally. My constituent Michael Mars, who is now retired but was a senior consultant at Great Ormond Street hospital, said:

“The essential problem is the feeling of impotence experienced by those at the coal face

because of an

“overwhelming management culture where clinical knowledge and experience is secondary to management.”

Such words echo, because we hear them from a lot of other public service professions such as teachers and the police. They all say that they are doing all the paperwork and are not allowed to do what they are supposed to do. Michael Mars talked about survival in the culture of management and worries that we might be in danger of forgetting what clinical consultants are appointed to do.

At the other end of the career scale are junior doctors, on whom there was a debate in this Chamber on Monday. I have had numerous representations from constituents who are junior doctors. The latest NHS staff survey showed that the percentage of junior doctors suffering from work-related stress has gone from 20% in 2010 to 34% in 2015.

Tulip Siddiq: As my hon. Friend is aware, junior doctors are poised to withdraw emergency cover for 48 hours in April. Does she agree that the Health Secretary’s comments, such as those about the British Medical Association being

“brilliantly clever at winding everyone up on social media”,

show his total disregard for medical professionals who are quite capable of knowing a bad deal when they see it?

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The Health Secretary is the one who is winding everyone up. It cannot be advisable to make staff feel undervalued and overworked. The health service cannot run on good will alone, nor can pharmacists and other such professions. The imposition of a new contract that is overwhelmingly opposed by the vast majority of junior doctors is part of a pattern. The majority of NHS staff have faced pay freezes or real-terms cuts in recent years. The Government should accept that they cannot keep asking everyone to do more and more for less and less.

With such a vast topic, there is never time to cover everything. As I said, I did not want to make this speech a blizzard of statistics, so I will briefly highlight one constituent’s case, then I will make some concluding remarks. Bree Robbins, from Ealing Common, actually ended up not coming to my surgery because she was in too much pain to make it in person, so we took up her case on the phone. Her issue is access to breast reconstruction surgery, and there is a question for the Minister here. My constituent was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2013. She underwent a mastectomy and then suffered an infection, which meant that the reconstruction was delayed. Eventually, she underwent partial reconstruction in January at Charing Cross hospital. She now needs that to be completed, but she is experiencing continued delays, even though she is in pain.

The response from Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust explained that the delay was due to an increase in urgent cancer cases in the plastic and reconstruction department. That is highly unsatisfactory for my constituent and prompts the question, what are the Government doing to ensure that those awaiting breast reconstruction surgery will undergo it in a timely manner, without having to face delays of three years, as my constituents do?

Ealing has an expanding population. Today, the House of Commons Library confirmed that, paradoxically, the number and percentage of the population aged under 18 and aged over 65 are increasing. Those are the two demographics that need NHS services most. The young and old populations seem to be getting bigger—I feel that I am “the squeezed middle”, to coin a phrase, as I am a mother and a daughter who has to run off to NHS services for offspring and parents.

No one doubts the need for comprehensive weekend care and for efficiencies to be made, but too often such plans amount to cutting corners. We heard in the Budget statement about the need for devolution, but the centralisation that we have discussed today is at odds with that. Pharmacists in my constituency fear that, ultimately, they will be merged with GP surgeries—or co-located or whatever it is called—contrary to popular need. People like to have such services at the end of their street.

Cuts are being targeted at the most deprived communities. There is a lot of distrust about the public consultation, “Shaping a Healthier Future”, because it was so flawed.

We have mentioned the escalating costs, and the changes are not good value for taxpayers; they are a waste of precious public resources and involve no business plan.

I have not gone into the Government's long-standing ambition to integrate NHS health services with council-run care services for the elderly. Ealing is not one of the pilot boroughs, so I will leave that subject to my colleagues. Nor are we a pilot borough for the health devolution deal, announced at the end of last year by Simon Stevens, but I will end with his words at the launch. He said:

"In London's NHS, we've got some of the best health services anywhere on the planet, but also some of the most pressurised. London is the world's most dynamic and diverse city—why shouldn't it be the healthiest?"

I am sure that both Opposition and Government Members agree, and I am interested to hear other contributions to the debate.

1.59 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on securing the debate on London's NHS. The subject is vital to people not just in London but nationally and internationally because we provide a health service for not just people resident in London but those who work in London and those who come to London for specialist treatment. I apologise that I may not be here for the winding-up speeches; I must attend the debate in the Chamber where I am the lead speaker. My apologies if I have to scuttle off before other contributions.

I want to speak about three issues in my contribution: primary care; the position at Northwick Park hospital; and the Royal National Orthopaedic hospital. In terms of primary care, without doubt, one problem we experience in London is that people have difficulty getting on to a list for a GP and then getting appointments when they are ill. As a result, when a person is ill, they immediately say, "Well, if I can't get an appointment with my GP, I will go to A&E or the urgent care centre or whatever facilities are around." That means that people turn up at A&E and at urgent care centres who should be seen by GPs or even by nurses at GP surgeries—they do not necessarily need to be seen by doctors.

We all have anecdotes we can share, but at the health centre to which I go the GP appointments system is now such that people can only register for appointments 48 hours in advance—it is always quite difficult to know whether one will be ill in 48 hours—or walk in and wait; however, how long will it take to be seen after all the appointments? That leads to a challenge. Immediately, people say, "I'm not going to do that, because I can turn up at A&E or the urgent care centre and make sure I am seen." Therefore, the all-party parliamentary group on primary care and public health, which I co-chair, has pointed to the need for better signposting in the national health service to point patients to the right place and to ensure that primary care in particular can provide care for those who need it.

I will move on to Northwick Park hospital. As I said in my intervention on the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton, who led the debate, its A&E performance was truly dreadful. I can speak from personal experience: I waited in A&E for some eight hours before I was seen on an urgent care basis and received medical intervention.

It was a disgrace. People were waiting for far too long and never, ever were the targets achieved. However, in November 2014, the Government invested in the new A&E at Northwick Park hospital and since then there has been a complete transformation.

One of the problems we had with Central Middlesex hospital having an A&E was that its brilliant doctors and nurses were sitting around, waiting for patients to arrive; patients would go to the A&E at Northwick Park because it was nearer and more convenient. The consequence of the A&E at Central Middlesex closing and those doctors and nurses transferring to Northwick Park was that performance transformed overnight.

I have the latest figures. When we talk about stats, we should talk about what is going on now in reality, not what happened in the past. At Northwick Park, in January, 89% of patients were seen within four hours and—*[Interruption.]* I accept that the target has not been reached, but the key issue is that that is far from the dramatic underperformance that the hon. Lady described. The reality is that 90.3% of patients were waiting less than 18 weeks to start treatment at the end of January, and we all accept that January is probably the hardest month for the NHS because of difficulty with the cold weather.

Cancer waiting times are a vital aspect, and Northwick Park hospital meets the targets: 94.1% of patients with suspected cancer were seen by a specialist within two weeks. I would much rather see that figure at 100%, but that is above the target of 93%. Of patients diagnosed with cancer, 99.2% began treatment within 31 days—the target is 96%, so that is an outstanding performance. Finally, 86% of patients began cancer treatment within 62 days of an urgent GP referral; the target is 85%. It is therefore fair to say that Northwick Park hospital—it is not in my constituency but virtually all my constituents use it—has transformed itself under this Conservative Administration. It is important to get the facts on the record, so that people can congratulate the health providers, who are delivering an excellent service. Of course, there are always challenges. We know there is a deficit, but the key is that Northwick Park hospital's funding from the CCG will see a 6.01% increase this year. That is a good performance; we can see that money is being invested.

Just before the 2010 election, when I was elected for the first time, under the previous Labour Government, there was a review of accident and emergency services in north-west London. We heard not a squeak from Labour MPs about the fact that as part of that review they wanted to close down five of the A&Es in north-west London. *[Interruption.]* Oh yes. The incoming Health Secretary said, "We are going to stop that review in its tracks, and any review of A&E services will be clinically led, not driven by particular elements or arguments." The reality is that this is nothing new; this is being driven by the NHS and the NHS bureaucracy. That is what I want to move on to finally.

Andy Slaughter: The hon. Gentleman needs to substantiate both elements of what he just said. To go back 10 years to try to defend the current crisis in the NHS in his constituency is a bit unnecessary. The fact is that promises were made by his party about specific hospitals as well as about A&E generally and it has gone back on almost every single one of those. A little less hubris from him would be appropriate.

Bob Blackman: I am going back not 10 years but to 2009 when a report was produced under the previous Labour Administration that would have decimated us in north-west London in terms of A&E. The incoming Health Secretary froze that and said, “No, we’re not going to implement this. We want a clinically led review of what provision should be provided.” In certain instances, it is clear that some of those areas have been led in that way. I am going to talk about Northwick Park hospital because through better investment and better provision it has been transformed and it treats people better.

Dr Huq: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bob Blackman: I will give way briefly to the hon. Lady, who made a very long oration.

Dr Huq: The hon. Gentleman will know that the most recent Care Quality Commission report on Northwick Park hospital says that it requires improvement. Several shortcomings were found. Does he appreciate why Northwick Park strikes fear into the hearts of many of my constituents?

Bob Blackman: I will come on to a CQC report on the Royal National Orthopaedic hospital in my constituency in a minute. The reality is we can pick and choose from CQC reports, but I want to ensure that the brilliant doctors, nurses and support staff who work in Northwick Park hospital are recognised for the work they do and not the fear, uncertainty and doubt created by Opposition Members about the performance of an outstanding hospital.

I will move on to the Royal National Orthopaedic hospital in my constituency. The Minister knows about this subject extremely well. The reality is shown in the most recent CQC report, which I will quote directly. It said that the hospital has

“Outstanding clinical outcomes for patients”

in premises that were—and are—

“not fit for purpose—it does not provide an adequate environment to care and treat patients.”

I could not have put it better myself. The reality is that, over the past 30 years, under Governments of all persuasions, we have heard promises to rebuild the Royal National Orthopaedic hospital. The medical and support staff there do a brilliant job; if I took you to that hospital, Mr Turner, you would see for yourself. They are treating patients in Nissen huts created during the second world war. It is an absolute disgrace that staff have to operate in such dreadful facilities. They do brilliant work to rehabilitate patients who come in crippled and leave much better able to live a decent-quality life.

That is why I am concerned about national health service bureaucracy. Previous Governments have committed to funding. The Chancellor stood up at the Dispatch Box during the emergency Budget in June 2010 and agreed and confirmed funding to rebuild the hospital. None the less, we still drag on. It is nothing to do with the Government; it is NHS bureaucracy. I will not go through all the details of everything we and the board have had to do to get to the point where the hospital can be rebuilt.

We have a plan. The hospital will be completely rebuilt. We will have a private hospital alongside the NHS hospital, so that consultants and medical staff

will not have to leave the site to do their excellent work. We will sell off part of the land for much-needed housing. Instead of selling it off as a job lot, we will sell it off in tranches to ensure that we get the best value for money, and then the money can be reinvested in the national health service, in the hospital itself.

One would think that, if someone came up with a plan like that, the NHS bureaucracy would be leaping to say, “Yes, let’s get on with it.” Instead, we have had report after report, and business case after business case. I will not, as I did once in the Chamber, describe the 11 stages of the business case that a hospital must go through to get approval for finance. More money is spent on management consultants producing reports than on hospital consultants delivering health services.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): I think I agree with the hon. Gentleman on that last point. In last week’s Budget, the Government shifted more than £1 billion within the NHS from the capital budget to the revenue budget. How does he think that helps deliver the kinds of building that we need to provide health services in the 21st century?

Bob Blackman: Clearly, the Government must balance the capital and revenue budgets and ensure that they and the national health service are fit for purpose. I believe passionately that it is wrong to expect our medical professionals and brilliant staff across the health service to operate out of substandard buildings. The more that we do to improve them, the better.

As the Minister will know, I have been agitating on this issue for the past six years. I will not stop until we get what we deserve—a rebuilt hospital of which we can all be proud. The reality is that the NHS Trust Development Authority, which seems to dictate finances within the national health service, is holding up this prestigious project. The hospital now has planning permission, and we are ready to go. Immediately on approval by the TDA, demolition of the existing buildings will start, and work will begin on the new hospital in June or July this year. However, the TDA has yet to approve. We now have a further eight-week delay while the TDA looks again at the business case to see whether it is justified. The staff, patients and everyone connected with the hospital are growing frustrated as a result of what has happened over not just the past six years but the 30-odd years before it as well.

We seek assurances from the Minister that the prevaricating TDA will be leaned on to give a decision, which will be to the benefit of the hospital, the patients and the health service in London and nationally, so that we can ensure that this brilliant hospital continues with its great work. I apologise that I will not necessarily be here to hear the Minister confirm the good news that she will do all that she can to make that happen, but I will sit down—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): On that specific point, as I am conscious that my hon. Friend might not be back, my noble Friend Lord Prior in the other place took a debate on this topic this week and undertook to set up a meeting with the NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement and interested peers should there be any slippage in the timetable set out today by NHSI for approval of this

important project. I know that that invitation will be extended to my hon. Friend as well, to give him a little assurance on that.

Mr Andrew Turner (in the Chair): I call the Minister—no, Mr Blackman.

Bob Blackman: Mr Turner, if I were the Minister, I would be ensuring that it was delivered, but that is another issue. I welcome the Minister's remarks. Clearly, people will be watching and waiting. As she said, there was a debate in the other place only last week, and we had a good, positive answer during oral questions this week, assuring us that it is a key project for the health service. All those who are waiting with their pens poised could give us an Easter present of which we can all be proud on Maundy Thursday by signing off the business case, letting us get on with the project and ensuring that it is delivered for the benefit of all.

2.16 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Mr Turner, and to be called early in the debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us this long and generous slot on the last day before the recess. Given that it is the last day, there is a good turnout from London Labour Members, and one or two London Conservative Members. Indeed, we had the whole of the Liberal Democrat representation for London, but he has gone now.

I particularly thank my neighbour and hon. Friend the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) for introducing this debate in a comprehensive manner, which permits me to make my contribution shorter than it otherwise would have been, because I am going to deal with some of the same issues. I preface my remarks by saying that London Members deal with a great many health service issues—on the whole successfully—through their clinical commissioning groups, hospital trusts and the other myriad health service bodies that the Government inflicted on us in the last top-down reorganisation.

We have heard about primary care, mental health and community pharmacies. The reason why we—particularly the 11 Labour MPs for north and west London—keep returning again and again to the issue of acute hospitals and the “Shaping a Healthier Future” programme is not only that it is such a major reorganisation of services but that it has become very politicised. Of course, all these issues are political—money spent on the health service is always political—but we feel that we are either not being given information or being given the wrong information.

I must disagree with the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). My memory goes back a long way. I was part of the campaign against the closure of Charing Cross hospital in the early 1990s. It was successful, obviously, but it was a long and hard-fought campaign, and again, the grounds for closure were entirely spurious. I remember the former Member for Brentford and Isleworth, who was a Health Minister, leading that campaign when she was the head of nursing there.

Dawn Butler: I remember leading a campaign in 2006 to save Central Middlesex hospital's A&E, which was successful. Unfortunately, it then closed when I was not an MP in, I think, 2011.

Andy Slaughter: We all bear these scars. I am grateful for all the efforts that Members have made to protect their local health services.

The next time that Charing Cross hospital came up, it was in the context of the 2005 election campaign, when a Conservative candidate, now the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), shamelessly said that it was going to close, with no evidence whatever; there were no plans to close it. The candidate running against me in 2010 did exactly the same in relation to the hospital in my constituency. The difference was that immediately after the 2010 election, plans began to be drawn up—we did not see them until 2012—by McKinsey and others. The reference to consultants was well made by the hon. Member for Harrow East, because the spend on consultants on “Shaping a Healthier Future” alone is running at something like £20 million per annum at the moment.

I did not recognise, in what the hon. Gentleman said, what has actually happened. The brief history is as follows. Those plans were presented. They were kept under wraps and took us all by surprise with the dramatic changes they contained—the downgrading of the four A&Es and what was going to happen to Ealing and Charing Cross hospitals. However, that was a long time ago now, in the summer of 2012. The only revision to those published proposals was at the end of the so-called consultation process in February 2013. Apart from references in board papers and other statements, we have not had a formal upgrade to the process since then. That is more than three years ago, yet the proposals affect about 2 million people across the whole of west and north-west London.

I accept that there can be faults on all sides and that in the run-up to elections, people get quite emotional and political about these issues, but that is partly because they matter so much to our constituents. At the 2015 election, at least we were getting emotional and political about something that was actually proposed, rather than something that was invented. Since the election last year, we have attempted—certainly I have, and I think this goes for a number of my colleagues—to engage in the process with Ministers and officials, partly to find out what is going on and partly to try to influence the outcome. The Minister met a group of MPs last summer and said that there would be a great deal of engagement and transparency. I have not given up on that, but it has not happened so far.

The key document in the “Shaping a Healthier Future” programme—the implementation business plan—is still under wraps. We have been asking for it for the best part of three years, formally, informally or through freedom of information requests. Different reasons have been given at different times—“It's a work in progress,” or “It's commercially confidential”; all the usual reasons. It becomes a bit ridiculous after a while. I am not sure it is very helpful to the Government or the NHS, because in the end we have to rely on what information we can scrape together.

Of course, the world has changed a lot in those three years. Let me give some examples. The London head of NHS England, Anne Rainsberry, came to brief Labour London Members earlier this week and gave us some quite interesting information. First, “Shaping a Healthier Future” alone will not deal with the financial problems, which have got substantially worse. My trust, Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, last reported that it was

[*Andy Slaughter*]

running a £25 million deficit, but I know that other trusts, including London North West Healthcare Trust, have higher deficits than that.

The position has got markedly worse. I know the Government say there is a clinical basis for “Shaping a Healthier Future”, but it is interesting that there has been a concession that there is a financial basis to it; it is about saving money. Opposition Members would say that it is mainly about saving money, but the Government might say that that is an ancillary purpose. We are now being told that even if “Shaping a Healthier Future” were implemented, it would not save enough money given the deteriorating situation.

The shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), mentioned the shift from capital to revenue, partly as a bail-out. That may be a crisis move to offset the immediate financial crisis, but it has implications, particularly for a grandiloquent project such as “Shaping a Healthier Future”, which is about a major redesign of hospital sites—particularly the Charing Cross and St Mary’s sites, which are taking the bulk of the money.

We know—the NHS is now being slightly more candid about this—that the Treasury is getting cold feet about the programme, and the date is being pushed back and back. That is good in a way, because originally we were told that Charing Cross was going to be demolished in 2016-17, and now we are talking about 2020 at the earliest. I am delighted by that, because the longer it is pushed back, the less likely it is to happen, but it reflects serious concerns in the Treasury, and possibly in the Department of Health, about where the programme is going.

Dawn Butler: My hon. Friend is being generous with his time. Is he concerned, as I am, by the letter from Clare Parker, the senior responsible officer for “Shaping a Healthier Future”? Brent has been trying to get hold of the latest version of the implementation business case. She notes the request, but states:

“Unfortunately this document is in draft form and not currently suitable to be shared.”

Does he wonder, as Brent and I do, when we will be able to have sight of that document?

Andy Slaughter: That is exactly the document I have been discussing. In some ways, Clare Parker’s embarrassment comes through in that letter. She is a good officer. She is the officer primarily responsible for delivering “Shaping a Healthier Future” and is effectively running five CCGs in that capacity. I think she would like to be more candid with us than she is in that letter. I urge the Minister to encourage people in CCGs, trusts and the Department to be more candid. She might find that there is more understanding of the problems than she thinks.

The question is—I discussed it with Clare Parker only a few weeks ago—where are we going with this programme? If the Treasury is putting out alarm signals about whether it can fund the programme, and principally the rebuilding of St Mary’s and Charing Cross, what will happen? The strong rumour is that reductions in service will have to take place, because services have a financial cost. The type 1 A&E and other services will

have to go from Charing Cross, with the hospital effectively becoming a primary care and treatment centre, and the situation will be similar at Ealing.

Rather than the demolition, clearing and part sale of those sites, followed by rebuilding, which would cost hundreds of millions of pounds, we may just mothball the existing buildings, which are on the whole ’60s and ’70s buildings, with part of them not being used at all and the rest being used for the new facilities. In some ways, that would be the worst of all worlds, although it would at least preserve the sites and the capacity for future Governments to reactivate them. That has certainly not been denied to me, although I think it was said that that is a more advanced plan at Ealing than at Charing Cross, where it is still plan B. In other words, demolition is still on the cards, but there has to be a fall-back position if the Treasury does not fund it.

There is another factor. Even if the NHS does not move on, the rest of the world does. My hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), who could not be here today, is pressuring strongly for the facts in relation to St Mary’s hospital, which serves her constituents, as I am for Charing Cross. Because of the grandiose scheme to build the “Pole”, or the new Shard, which would take up some of the land on the St Mary’s site, the existing plans will no longer be possible. Instead of the A&E, there will be a nice piazza outside a 95-storey office block, which I am sure is much more useful to constituents. Such fundamental changes will mean that the land is more valuable, the building costs are greater and the substantial plans for the modernisation of St Mary’s will not be able to go ahead, at least as planned. Yet many of the buildings there are listed, so what is happening? I like to think that something is happening, but I would also like to be told about it. It is unacceptable for three years to pass without any information being put on the record or given out.

Anne Rainsberry also said that we are still maintaining the Keogh principles, as if that would be a surprise or we would not welcome it. Many of the changes that have happened are, of course, improvements to the service. The hyper-acute stroke unit at Charing Cross has been classed as the best in the country. It is a fantastic unit that saves a lot of lives. The stroke unit from St Mary’s has just been moved to Charing Cross. Of course, the costs associated with that and with ensuring that it operates properly will apparently be wasted, because in four or five years’ time, the intention is to close it, demolish it and move it all back to St Mary’s again. I just cannot follow the logic, and I begin to lose confidence in the NHS’s ability to plan.

We have been through all this about three times in west London. We went through the whole Paddington basin fiasco and other schemes to do with merging Hammersmith and Charing Cross hospitals. In that time, demand has changed. The latest figures show that demand for A&E at Charing Cross has gone up by 13%, and none of the hospitals is meeting its A&E waiting target. There is massive population expansion, and I was pleased to be told by NHS England that when the business plan is produced, it will be based on the latest figures, so we will not be relying on the population statistics from five years ago.

The population is growing astronomically. When people drive through west London, they can see building going on on every street corner. The anticipated growth in

population runs to tens or hundreds of thousands over a very short period, yet whenever I look at the plans—I assure hon. Members that I look at them all, as I monitor demographic changes—I never see any increase in public services. I never see the new schools, hospitals or GP surgeries, I just see massive blocks of luxury flats being put up everywhere. Even people who live in blocks of luxury flats get ill sometimes, although I have genuinely been told that it will mostly be wealthy young professionals living there and they will not need hospitals, so I do not need to worry too much about them.

Ruth Cadbury: Skiing injuries.

Andy Slaughter: Well, perhaps. The situation does not give us a lot of confidence in the plans that are being made.

I hope that I have given a flavour of what is happening. I cannot do much more than that, because I do not have the information available. This is the No. 1 issue for my constituents, yet when I look back to see how often I have raised it—I have made one speech on it since the election and asked a few questions to Ministers—I am sorry to see that on the whole, I get pretty dismissive answers. I do not think that is how this Minister would wish to behave.

I ask that sooner or later—sooner, preferably—we get the business plan so that we can see what changes are being proposed and what the timetable is. I also ask for a realistic reassessment of the need for acute hospital services, because I do not believe that “Shaping a Healthier Future”—2010 or 2012—will be the appropriate mechanism for doing that. If the Government are prepared to do that, I am sure that all Members, irrespective of party or of the proposals for their local hospital, will be prepared to sit down and negotiate.

2.34 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on securing the debate. I was delighted to support her bid to the Backbench Business Committee to have the opportunity to debate this incredibly important subject. The NHS is source of great pride. Londoners are particularly protective of healthcare in their area, and none more so than the people of Sutton. I shall speak about my local area, but I think the story and the issues are the same throughout London.

For many years, people in Sutton have talked about St Helier hospital as the focal point of the community and of local healthcare. I serve as a volunteer at the hospital—I go regularly to feed people on the stroke ward—and I try to continue doing that even now I have been elected to Parliament, as it gives me a great opportunity to go in and see people on the front line. My family have also used the hospital. Before the last election, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) weaponised the NHS. I tend to weaponise my mum’s use of the NHS. She has been brought in from sheltered accommodation, having taken a couple of falls, and when she injured her hand and fractured her hip, St Helier treated her really well. The hospital has a particularly good hip fracture unit that is renowned across London and, indeed, across the country.

Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust is predicted to run a deficit this year, despite hard work to try and break even, as it did last year. Opposition Members may use that as a brickbat to throw at the Government in respect of funding, but they fail to look at some of the symptoms behind what is happening in St Helier hospital in particular. The building has been crumbling for many years and is getting beyond use. For as long as I have lived in Sutton, which is about 26 or 27 years, there has been a political campaign, primarily by the Liberal Democrats in my area but involving other parties too, trying to “Save St Helier”—scaring people into believing that the hospital is to close imminently. Using the hospital as a political football has resulted in a failure to get some sort of consensus or agreement on how we can protect healthcare and build a really effective healthcare system in Sutton.

The trust has that deficit and the chief executive will need to tackle it without compromising quality.

Clive Efford: On the threatened closure of St Helier hospital, perhaps I have been in this place for longer than I should have been—[HON. MEMBERS: “No!”] Thanks, I was hoping to get that response. I seem to remember that a Minister resigned in order to fight the campaign to defend St Helier hospital. He should have known what he was talking about, because he was a Health Minister at that time.

Paul Scully: Obviously he did not, which is why I won the election against him—[*Interruption.*] It is funny. I think the tale was that he resigned, but I do not know a lot of Ministers who would resign to save a hospital when they were one of the Ministers in charge. Others have reported that he was sacked. I do not know the truth, and I am not sure we will ever know.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): For the sake of clarity, I am in the next-door seat to my hon. Friend and many of my constituents look to St Helier hospital. An outrageous campaign was run by the Labour party in 2014, completely without foundation, about the hospital closing. It was at the time of the local government elections, when the Government, all the management of St Helier and all the board papers showed that there was no plan to close the hospital. It was exactly as my hon. Friend says: a scare story.

Paul Scully: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point, and he is absolutely correct. It is why we need some degree of certainty. For many years now, we have had such things as “Better Healthcare Closer to Home” and “Better Services Better Value”—an alphabet soup of NHS changes, with no degree of certainty for residents or staff in that hospital. A lot of the BSBV review was clinician-led, but it was based on the premise that they wanted to concentrate consultants in certain places—in my case, at St George’s hospital in Tooting—because they did not have enough consultants in each of the different hospitals seeing enough of the more unusual cases; they wanted to concentrate expertise.

Imagine a whole load of politicians in Sutton telling residents time and again that the hospital is about to close, as my hon. Friend just said. Where would a newly qualified consultant want to go and practise? Would they want to go to a hospital that they are being told is

[Paul Scully]

about to close down, or would they go just up the road to one that receives all the plaudits and which has all the concentration of expertise? I know what I would do. If people talk down their local hospital and healthcare, it may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. They may be in danger of getting a result that is exactly the opposite of what they seek.

Ruth Cadbury: The hon. Gentleman is making a point, but some services have moved or closed without political problems because the people who used them and valued them realised that change was necessary. I suggest that the change in stroke and trauma services in recent years was right—fewer, larger, better. I also suggest that the opposition to changes the hon. Gentleman describes is caused by genuine worry that the solutions will not provide the adequate future service that we all want for London. In addition, in recent years we have seen a significant rise in population in London. We do not oppose that per se, but the health service in all its facets should be seen to be growing to accommodate that rising population.

Paul Scully: The hon. Lady makes some interesting points. There have been changes and closures in Sutton. The stroke service was one, and it made sense to provide immediate treatment at St George's although it was further away, because those first few hours are crucial. Several smaller hospitals also closed over many years. However, I return to the changes and closures of A&E and maternity services to concentrate them at St George's. Although it is only a few miles away, in rush hour traffic it takes those without the ambulance service's blues and twos a long time to get to St George's. If politicians were concerned, I would have thought they would do a more effective job than just trying to get tens of thousands of signatures on a petition aimed at the primary care trust. It took so long that the petition was still being presented two and a half years after PCTs were abolished in favour of CCGs. Effectively it was a data-harvesting exercise to extract a whole lot of email addresses that could be used in a political campaign and as a political football. The NHS is inherently political, but sometimes we must take the party politics out of it and focus on healthcare and what we have to do to best treat patients in a local area.

As I was saying, the St Helier building is fast becoming not fit for purpose, with 43% of the space having been deemed functionally unsuitable. That is no way to provide 21st century healthcare. The hospital predates the NHS by some time. The huge white building on a hill was used by German fighters to line up as they were coming to London on their bombing raids.

I look forward to plans being produced, using any capital funding we can attract from the Government in a cost effective way, so that it is not too onerous for the Treasury, to make use of all the component parts of the Epsom, St Helier and Sutton hospital sites. Businesses, the Royal Marsden hospital and the Institute of Cancer Research are sited there and the NHS is planning an exciting project—a London cancer hub—to attract even more world-class research. The Institute of Cancer Research and the Royal Marsden have a world-class reputation and it would be fantastic to expand it, but the Royal Marsden needs acute facilities to support

treatment there. If we can use that huge space for healthcare for the borough as well specialist healthcare, that would be brilliant.

The “Save St Helier” campaign is great in theory, but there are some holes in the plans and there may be unintended consequences resulting in the opposite of what we want. With the “Better Services Better Value” campaign, the fact that St Helier sits between Kingston hospital, St George's hospital, Croydon University hospital and Epsom hospital means it is always at threat because of the way the catchment area is designed. The trust is acutely aware of that. We want St Helier to be meshed into the London cancer hub with an integrated approach.

We have heard that the NHS can be somewhat bureaucratic. A few years back, I was at a hospital that closed—Queen Mary's hospital for children. It was eventually sold for a secondary school and housing in Sutton, but it took two years and £1 million in legal fees for two public bodies, the local authority and the NHS to agree terms. The lawyers got the money and children were not educated there for another two years at a time when there was a shortage of school places. Cutting through that bureaucracy and making sure we get the healthcare we want without having to go through the 11 tiers to which my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) referred would be fantastic.

We have heard a little about the difficulties of getting GP appointments and how infrastructure in London does not always keep up with planning and the need for housing. Sutton is no different. Worcester Park is one of the densest wards on the border with Kingston and has two vets but no GPs. I am not sure what that tells us about Worcester Park, but there is certainly a lack of planning somewhere.

I live in Carshalton and the one Liberal Democrat MP who was here is my MP. There is a health centre and it is a good example of how we might roll things up across Sutton and other areas. Two practices have come together in a purpose-built building with a shared practice, so it is slightly easier to get an appointment, although it may be not with one's named doctor, but with one of their colleagues. People can wait to see their named doctor, or they can get a reasonably quick appointment if it is an emergency; they can have blood tests, antenatal care and vaccinations. I recently had a rabies vaccination there—for a trip to Burma, not because of the prospect of facing hostile Opposition Members. The range of facilities helps to keep people away from A&E.

I have visited several pharmacies in my local area. They are concerned about closures, but the Minister has talked about putting in extra funding and integrating the pharmacy service as an alternative first port of call.

Dr Huq: I understand that the block grant that pharmacists receive for things such as driving around delivering medicines is being cut by 6%.

Paul Scully: My understanding is that that may vary from pharmacy to pharmacy. It is important that, however the block grant is carved up, we can offer the range of services in any area. I was at a pharmacy last week that had a needle exchange programme, but another just round the corner does not offer that. It is important to have a range of services in a given area.

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Gentleman is referring to community pharmacies. One of the latest estimates of the Government's proposals is that up to 3,000 community pharmacies could close. What impact does he believe that would have on his constituents?

Paul Scully: The pharmacists raised that with me last week, and I am meeting a delegation of them next week as well. Rather than an estimate, I want to see more detail on that to work out how we can give pharmacies more information, data and space to use their consulting rooms, to make them the true first port of call. It occurs to me that people tend to look to their GP when they are ill, whereas pharmacists—especially the ones that deliver and go into people's homes—can see people in their homes and get indicators that may predict other illnesses. Any preventive measures that can be taken through community pharmacists would be very useful.

In conclusion, I come back to the fact that I really do not want to see hospitals and healthcare used as a political football in Sutton or across London. I want to ensure that we have excellent healthcare in St Helier, but this is not about saving St Helier per se. It is about saving and protecting local healthcare, so that every one of the 190,000-odd residents in the London Borough of Sutton can get easy access to a GP, a community pharmacy, A&E, maternity services, children's services, daycare and the whole range of services in their local area. I want to ensure that they can do that not in a building that is making them feel worse by its very nature, design and crumbling fabric, but in a building that is designed to help them get better.

Sutton has made one innovation particularly well. It is one of two trusts in London that is running a vanguard scheme in nursing homes. That kind of innovation is really interesting: a group of nursing homes have got together in Sutton with the hospital trust; there are ward rounds in the nursing homes, so that the patients do not have to go into hospital. Although hospital is the best place to get treatment, it is not usually the best place to recuperate. The more we can work effectively out in the field—in people's homes and in care homes—the better. I want that collection of innovations to develop over the next few years for excellent healthcare in Sutton.

2.52 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Turner. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) for her lovely contribution. It was very colourful, as per usual. As well as the subject being serious, I appreciate her opening speech.

I will talk about the crisis in A&E and access to primary care in my constituency. North Middlesex University hospital A&E has recently become the subject of national attention. In December 2015, a patient died in A&E and, at the end of January, the A&E department subsequently received a notification of a risk summit. Waiting times reached crisis point on Friday 19 February, when patients were reported to have been left for up to seven hours on hospital trolleys. Medics came under such extreme pressure that they were forced, at 11 pm, to put a message over the tannoy advising patients to go home unless they were dying. The crisis at the hospital

did not go unnoticed. It was widely reported in the media, including in my local paper and many major national newspapers such as *The Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail* and *The Independent*.

Earlier, the Minister accused my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton of being alarmist. I would like the Minister really to listen to me and appreciate where I am coming from. My constituents were those people in that hospital and the reality for them is very difficult, so I would like her to reflect on what she said.

The incident was not isolated. Separate reports reveal that, over the previous week, paramedics were forced to wait for hours in A&E because there was a shortage of trolleys. One of my constituents phoned my office from the A&E complaining about the unacceptably long waiting hours. She was so worried about her loved ones that she did not know whether to leave her mother there or to take her home. My staff had to talk her through that and told her to stay because that is where the doctors were, so it was the safest place for her to stay with her mother.

I believe that the staff in North Middlesex University hospital are under enormous pressure and are doing a fantastic job despite that. The unfolding events are clearly symptomatic of a wider crisis in the NHS locally. A Care Quality Commission report in 2014 failed the department, saying there is an overreliance from people living in the community. That overreliance is understandable given the December 2013 closure of Chase Farm hospital A&E, which is in the west of Enfield, the borough in which Edmonton resides. That has put North Middlesex University hospital under enormous pressure. It is clear that the overreliance on the A&E service results not only from the closure of Chase Farm A&E, but from the pressures on local GP services.

Research published in 2015 by the National Audit Office, entitled, "Investigating the impact of out-of-hours GP services on A&E attendance rates: multilevel regression analysis" found that satisfaction with overall GP services is significantly associated with the level of attendance at A&E both overall and out of hours. A 1% increase in patients satisfied with their GP practice's opening hours is also associated with the reduction in A&E attendance. The latest report from the NAO, "Stocktake of access to general practice in England", shows that patient satisfaction continues to decline. A fifth of those surveyed reported that GP opening hours were inconvenient.

Enfield, in general, has a problem with unhealthy living, which has contributed to the problem in my constituency. We have a prevalence—unfortunately, the ninth highest rate in London—of coronary heart disease. Strokes are prevalent; we have the eighth highest rate in London. Enfield also has the seventh highest rate of diabetes in London. As hon. Members can see, my constituents are very sick and poorly. We need GP services that people can attend at a convenient time, and where they can get an appointment that will ensure they get a referral to hospital, so that they do not present themselves at A&E.

With the exception of one ward, Bush Hill Park, Edmonton is, socially and economically, a deprived constituency. Of the seven wards in my constituency, three—Upper Edmonton, Ponders End and Jubilee—are among the five wards in Enfield with the lowest life expectancy. Healthwatch Enfield found, through a survey

[Kate Osamor]

in the summer, that the vast majority of those not registered with a GP in Enfield are in Lower Edmonton, which is in my constituency. However, when the Government replace public health funding by local business rates, as suggested in the 2015 spending review, it will be challenging for an economically deprived borough such as Enfield adequately to fund public health activities to monitor and sustain the current pace of improvement in the health of Enfield's population.

I wrote to a Health Minister raising my concerns and requesting a meeting about these matters more than a month ago, and I received a response to one of my questions about half an hour ago. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison) for that—[*Interruption.*] She has done well. I did ask a few days ago, but I thank her for responding. I was going to say that I received no response but I will not say that because I did. However, I would like to have a meeting, if possible, to talk about the seriousness of the crisis in my constituency and the effect it is having.

Jane Ellison: I would be happy to do that.

Kate Osamor: I thank the Minister very much for that, and I will end there.

[Ms KAREN BUCK *in the Chair*]

2.59 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck, and a pleasure to follow so many contributions from hon. Members from across London. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on securing the debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting us this opportunity to talk about the NHS across London.

The context is challenging across London, with a swiftly growing population, huge health pressures arising from demographic change and from London lifestyles, and a national health service that across the city is struggling to cope with those myriad pressures. We have seen that across the capital since the 2010 general election. A&E waiting times in hospitals throughout London, referral-to-treatment times and cancer waits have worsened throughout the period. As we have heard, Members from every corner of our capital city are reporting local pressures that reinforce that picture of national health service provision across London.

We feel that pressure acutely in Redbridge. Both the NHS trusts that cover our borough are in special measures: Barts Health NHS Trust, which covers the west of my constituency; and Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust, which serves patients throughout my constituency. Primary care is an issue, with patients increasingly struggling to get a GP appointment and finding new barriers put in their way, such as telephone consultations before a GP practice will even grant an appointment. There are also service reconfigurations.

We have already heard about service closures across the rest of London, and in Redbridge we remember the Conservative party's commitment before the 2010 general

election that there would be no enforced closures of accident and emergency or maternity units. Well, we lost the maternity unit at King George hospital, and the decision to close the accident and emergency department was taken in 2011 by Andrew Lansley when he was Secretary of State for Health. That decision still stands, although it has not yet been implemented because the NHS is in such a state of crisis locally. Our local A&E waiting times for the last six months show that we have failed at any point to hit the target of 95% of patients being seen within four hours. The worst rate in the last six months was 76.8%, in December, and the best was 92.6%, in February. People living in my constituency will not find that satisfactory. In the last couple of weeks, the chief executive of the Barking, Havering and Redbridge trust has had to apologise to the 1,015 patients who have waited more than a year for routine treatment such as knee operations, which is simply unacceptable.

There are some positives. I have mentioned the chief executive of the Barking, Havering and Redbridge trust. I have confidence in the trust's leadership. Since they came on board, they have approached the task energetically. They inherited an absolute mess that developed over a number of years, and there are some improvements, but as recent events have shown, there is still a long way to go.

I welcome the work that the clinical commissioning group and GPs are leading on primary care transformation to try to improve primary care services locally, but we are yet to see the fruits of their labour. I also welcome the extent to which the local authority, which is now Labour-led, has been leading the way on integration to help partners across the local health economy. I am pleased to see that my borough is taking part in piloting the accountable care organisation initiative, which I hope will bring real benefits to patients through greater integration between healthcare providers and our local authority. In that context, the cuts to local government spending and, in particular, to public health budgets are a real concern.

I should probably declare that I am still a serving councillor in the London Borough of Redbridge, albeit an unpaid one, so I am excellent value for money for my constituents.

Andy Slaughter: They should be the judge of that.

Wes Streeting: They may well be the judge, but I am standing down as a councillor in 2018. I was elected to Parliament while serving as a councillor, which is a good indication.

Seriously, the London Borough of Redbridge has the fourth lowest public health grant in London. Given the diversity of our population, and the pressures that that brings, it is a cause for concern. In that context, I was even more disappointed to find that the Government have cut our public health grant in-year. As a former cabinet member for health and wellbeing in Redbridge, and as the former chair of our health and wellbeing board, I know that we were already struggling to meet our statutory duties on public health, not least the new responsibilities we have been given, such as for health visiting, for which the allocation received from the Government was not sufficient. We managed to squeeze some extra funding out of the Government, but we are still struggling.

The reduction is disappointing, particularly in the context of London, where people's healthcare needs and lifestyles are placing pressures on the NHS. Public health investment is an upfront investment in people's lifestyles that will reduce NHS costs in the longer term, as well as improving people's health and wellbeing. I cannot understand why, in that context, preventive budgets such as public health budgets are bearing the brunt of cuts. I hope Redbridge's public health allocation in particular is something that the Department of Health will revisit.

I have talked about the financial challenge for local authorities, and I will now address the financial challenge facing the NHS and our local health economy. I was concerned, as everyone else was, to read David Laws's revelation at the weekend that, far from the £8 billion that keeps being mentioned as the hole in the NHS budget, Simon Stevens actually identified a £30 billion hole, of which he said £15 billion could be found through efficiencies and improvements. My maths makes that a £15 billion hole in the NHS budget, and it is a source of concern that the £8 billion promised by the Conservatives at the last election is still not there. We have seen the Chancellor having to shuffle money around. Earlier, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), the shadow Secretary of State for Health, talked about the reallocation from capital to revenue in terms of the health budget.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Public Accounts Committee recently considered the health budget following a National Audit Office report. There is a £22 billion gap, and one of the key drivers of that is the 4% efficiency savings year on year. Simon Stevens has himself acknowledged that that is too high and that 2% would be more reasonable. The head of NHS Improvement also acknowledged that it is a cause of acute hospitals' deficits at the moment.

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee for giving us that insight, which gives me even greater cause for concern about our local situation in Redbridge. The overall gap in funding for the NHS should be a concern to the whole country.

In my borough in particular, I am concerned by a report produced for NHS England by McKinsey & Company in, I believe, July 2014. The report has just been released by NHS England following a freedom of information request, and it identifies a Barking, Havering and Redbridge system gap of £128 million for commissioners and £260 million for providers. I am concerned by several things. One is that one way in which McKinsey identified that the BHR system will be able to address that gap is through acute reconfiguration of King George hospital, where the accident and emergency department is threatened with closure. I am deeply disappointed that, at a recent meeting of the Ilford North Conservatives attended by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) for his London mayoral campaign, the Conservatives once again stood up and said, "People should not worry about the accident and emergency department, because we always say it's going to close and it never does." The only reason why the accident and emergency department at King George hospital is still there is not because of a positive decision

to keep it but because the NHS trust and the local health economy are in such a mess that it would not be clinically safe to close it at this time; the accident and emergency department is still very much at risk.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The national health service bureaucracy has been trying to close the A&E at King George hospital since 2006. We are coming up to the 10th anniversary of the misnamed "Fit for the Future" document. My hon. Friend's predecessor, Lee Scott, and I fought a vigorous campaign to stop the closure at the time, and the closure decision was deemed to be clinically unsound. Now, the Trust Development Authority is in charge, and the A&E cannot be closed because the trust is not out of special measures. My hon. Friend has mentioned the trust's chief executive, Matthew Hopkins, who was hoping to get out of special measures by the end of the year, but that has not happened. We are still in a period of great uncertainty.

Wes Streeting: I agree with my hon. Friend and I welcome him back to Parliament this week after his break. *[Interruption.]* I know that he has gone to extraordinary lengths to test the resilience of the NHS in London and that he will talk about that shortly. We look forward to it.

In all seriousness, the A&E department is still at risk and many of my constituents worry that it is the financial drivers that are pressing ahead with the closure, rather than the clinical drivers. As my hon. Friend has said, given the length of time since the original case for closure was prepared and since the decision to close was made, it is not unreasonable to ask the Minister to commit to reopening that closure decision and to look at the issue with a fresh pair of eyes, testing whether the evidence base is still there, testing the assumptions that were made when the original closure proposal was put forward and giving people the assurance that it is clinical factors and the healthcare of our residents, rather than financial factors, that are driving this process.

The final thing I will draw upon from the McKinsey report is about meeting the financial pressure within the BHR system. McKinsey observes that to fully close the gap will require further stretch productivity achievement beyond the levels agreed locally, as well as additional private finance initiative support and the closure of the gap to the CCG allocation. The £140 million-odd deficit in 2013-14 was only reached after a £16 million PFI subsidy, and the deficit as a percentage of income is far larger even than it was for Barts at that time.

It is not unreasonable, as part of the wider changes in Redbridge and the work being led by the accountable care organisation, to expect the Government to provide further support in relation to our PFI debt. Many challenges face the local health economy in Redbridge and that debt is like an albatross around our necks. If the Government were to invest now in alleviating that pressure, we may get better outcomes in the long term. I hope that that is an issue the Minister will address when she responds to the debate.

3.12 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member

[Meg Hillier]

for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on securing the debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

I represent the Homerton hospital, which is a foundation trust, and a clinical commissioning group in Hackney that has good, clear clinical outcomes in a very deprived population. The level of deprivation is such that we have underlying population health outcomes that are not good despite the good healthcare available locally.

There is huge pressure on GP surgeries across east London in particular and London in general. Funding for the minimum practice income guarantee is under threat, and recruitment of GPs is very difficult now. Too often, committed but demoralised GPs, many of whom are older, are—in line with national trends—retiring early. We also have a devolution model that is being piloted in Hackney.

Given the time and to give the Minister the chance to respond, I will jump to some of the questions that I want to put to her. I will refer to the McKinsey report that has just seen the light of day today, although it was published in July 2015. It is very worrying. I do not have time to go into the report in detail, but it raises issues about my area that are similar to those raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting). It gives an indication of the gap in the health economy and the funding. We have looked at this type of gap in the Public Accounts Committee, holding three hearings on these issues in recent months. Those hearings have underlined the crisis in recruitment, poor retention of experienced staff and particularly the financial crisis in the NHS.

The PAC, which of course is a cross-party Committee, is not alone in looking into this situation; the National Audit Office has, too. The NAO tells us that in 2014 NHS commissioners and providers overspent for the first time, with a deficit of £471 million. It must have been around that time or before then that McKinsey was commissioned to do its work. We know that the position is deteriorating, despite the efforts of consultancies to come in and save the day—let me make it clear for the *Official Report* that I am being slightly ironic. The position is deteriorating so much that the total deficit in NHS trusts and foundation trusts is projected to be £2.2 billion.

As I highlighted in my intervention, in a PAC hearing on the subject, Jim Mackey, the head of NHS Improvement—we have also heard from Simon Stevens, the head of NHS England—acknowledged that the 4% efficiency savings target that was established by the Department of Health in 2010-11 was unrealistic. In fact, that target was set by the Chancellor, so I should perhaps absolve the Department of Health a little, as it was clearly set by the Treasury. Both Jim Mackey and Simon Stevens acknowledged that. Simon Stevens has said on the record that he would call delivery of 2% efficiency savings “more reasonable” for trusts. As I have highlighted, we have said in our report that there is not really a convincing plan for closing the £22 billion gap in NHS finances now looming.

I will come back to the McKinsey report as it relates to my own area, referring again to huge financial gaps in the NHS budget locally. However, it also refers to how to deal with those gaps, and that is what really

concerns me and it is what I am seeking an answer from the Minister about. The report refers to the engagement that McKinsey had:

“an intensive series of meetings and engagement...with material senior time and...complemented this with numerous sessions with Chairs, CEOs, Clinical Leaders and Finance Directors.”

So McKinsey has been getting people round the table, which is all well and good. However, the report continues:

“This engagement has been focused on building alignment around the case for change”—

so change is looming—

“on forcing the pace of this work and also in scoping future governance changes to sustain more rapid future delivery.”

Will the Minister be clear about what the plans are for “future governance” of health services in my part of London? I am sure that other Members will be interested to hear about their parts of London, as well. I ask her directly: is there a plan to amalgamate CCGs or to establish sub-regional health commissioners in London? We need to know what is happening and what the timescale is for any proposed changes.

Also, while we are considering the budget and the gaps in the budget, what commitment can the Minister make about NHS land? That has been a constituency concern of mine for some time. The PAC has heard fairly recently that the capital released to balance the budget deficit that we are seeing among trusts factors in some land for homes for health workers. So the full dividend of sale will not be taken and some land will be used to build homes for health workers, but figures were very light on the ground. If the Minister is able to respond today on this issue, I would be very grateful; if not, I would welcome a detailed letter from her on it.

In particular, I would be grateful if the Minister provided more information about the list of NHS sites released under the Government’s land disposals programme. The programme was overseen by the Department for Communities and Local Government and required every Department to come up with a list of sites that could be provided to build new homes. So far, it has been difficult to identify the sale of land and how many homes have actually been built. Again, that may not be something that the Minister has answers on today, given that another Department is the lead, but I think her Department should have some figures. Once again, if she cannot tell me about that today, I ask her to write to me about it, because housing for health workers is a key concern.

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is making a very important point. I intervene to put on the record my desire to be copied in to the response that she receives from the Minister.

Meg Hillier: I am sure the Minister will do that, but I am happy to share anything I receive from her. I am sure she will not be writing me secret letters, and even if she told me that she was I would ignore her, so I hope she provides information that is fully public.

There is a real concern about health workers being unable to afford to buy homes. When a group of local MPs met officials from the Barts trust after one of the trust’s more recent crises—it was around the time of, or just before, the general election—we asked them about the release of land for health workers. We got the distinct impression that those running the trust at the time—we have had new management in since—did not think that it was their responsibility to provide housing;

the process was just about disposing of the land to fill the black hole in the trust's budget. However, we know that health workers cannot afford to live in London and work locally; that is often true of doctors on good salaries, let alone anyone on a lower salary. There will be a real crisis if we cannot recruit health workers, and I will touch on that issue in a moment.

NHS England is keen to lay the blame for the financial crisis in acute trusts at the door of agency staff costs. The Secretary of State announced a cap on the pay rate in October, but the National Audit Office found that that is not the underlying problem. We also touched on the matter in a Public Accounts Committee hearing. It is the volume of agency working, rather than the rate paid, that is the bigger problem—the vacancy rate, requiring backfilling with agency workers, rather than the amount that they are paid. No doubt there is an problem there and the NHS should begin—I hope that it is beginning—to use its purchasing power to tackle that, but the foundation staffing model for hospitals, which is designed to fit the budget allocated by the Department, often has too few staff to deliver the required health outcomes. The NAO has uncovered the fact that 61% of temporary staffing requests in 2014-15 were to cover vacancies, not emergency cover.

Mike Gapes: Is my hon. Friend aware that the NHS employers and London NHS partnership have this week sent out information stating that nursing vacancies in London are running at 17%, which is 10,000 nurses? The NHS and local trusts are going all over the world to recruit, but the Home Office is bringing in a requirement for people to earn £35,000 before letting them in. Does not that contradict what the NHS is trying to do?

Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend anticipates what I was going to say—or perhaps it is just that we are all dealing with the same problems. Will the Minister outline what conversations her Department and NHS England have been having with the Home Office about the issue? We have seen many changes in the immigration rules, and they affect what happens. We should be recruiting and training British citizens and enabling them to earn a living, although I have no problem with other people working in the NHS. When we have problems with recruitment, of course it is right to look overseas, and many of our hospitals are well staffed by people from all round the world; but if those people cannot meet the threshold, they will not be allowed in, and that will cause a problem. I know that it is also causing concern to NHS England. No doubt the Minister is being lobbied; perhaps she can advise us. The cost to hospital trusts of the agency staff who fill in the gaps—they could be full-time workers from overseas or from the UK—has risen from £2.2 billion in 2009-10 to £3.3 billion in 2014-15.

I do not have much time to discuss GPs, but we know that that is a big issue, given the demand on the health service at primary care level in particular. On national figures, recruitment of new GPs is slow and early retirement is a looming crisis. If the Minister has not been alerted to that problem, I hope she will look into it. It is not a new phenomenon, but it is getting worse. Between 2005 and 2014 the proportion of GPs aged between 55 and 64 who left approximately doubled. In addition, there is an increasing proportion of unfilled training places—the figure was 12% in 2014-15—and an increasing number of younger GPs are leaving because the job is becoming

untenable, with 12-hour days typical. Many GPs just do not want to do that. We need good access and support in primary care to make it work.

The Public Accounts Committee has recently looked at another issue that is worth highlighting, which is the management and supply of NHS clinical staff. We would acknowledge, although our report is not yet out, that in an organisation the size of the national health service, getting things exactly right will always be complex. The figures and the available data about who is needed, together with the problems that I have mentioned to do with GPs and recruitment of hospital and other health workers, could have been predicted. That is something on which I want the Minister to respond: surely, if there is a prediction, there is a need to be able to react quickly, so that training places are available and people are encouraged to take them up. That way, we would ensure that there were enough health workers.

To return to the issue of housing, it is at crisis point in my constituency. Someone on quite a good income cannot afford to buy or to rent in the private sector and will not have a hope of getting social housing, so we have a vast turnover of people. Young people come and live like students, but when they want a home of their own, a spare bedroom for a child, or just a lifestyle that they think befits their status and age, they move out. We have a crisis across the board, but particularly for the NHS. I hope that the Minister will answer some of my questions about how housing can become a key concern for her Department as well as the Department for Communities and Local Government, which delivers housing. My worry is that if the Minister and her colleagues do not lobby hard, the problem will be forgotten in the overall housing crisis and will become a major crisis for public health and health and wellbeing in London.

3.24 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I am particularly pleased that you are in the Chair today, Ms Buck, because I am going to refer to St. Mary's hospital and the Imperial College Healthcare NHS trust, which saved my life. You know it very well. This is my first speech or question in the House—apart from my earlier interventions—since November. My neighbour, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) referred to my extended break. It was not voluntary or by choice.

I had been at a concert at the Royal Albert Hall—in fact, Jools Holland saved my life, because if I had not gone to the concert I would not have had friends with me during the events of that November evening. I was rushed by ambulance initially to Chelsea and Westminster hospital, where I collapsed. They scanned me and decided that I had such a serious ruptured thoracic aneurysm that they had to transfer me by ambulance to St Mary's hospital in Paddington. I came to in the ambulance and I have a vivid memory of going down the ramp out of the ambulance into A&E at St Mary's, where about 10 people were waiting. They ran me in the trolley straight into the operating theatre, where the consultant said, "I hope you don't mind. We have injected you with the anaesthetic, but do you mind if we cut the shirt off your back, because we have got to start straight away? The anaesthetic will take a moment to work." Then I heard a female voice saying, "I know this is hurting, but I'm sorry, I've got to do this." Then I was unconscious.

[Mike Gapes]

I had a total of eight weeks in St Mary's hospital, with five and a half weeks in the intensive care unit, for nearly three of which I was in an induced coma. I had a series of operations on my heart and a tracheostomy, which is an interesting experience whereby a tube is permanently inserted—or it seems as if it is permanent; fortunately it is not there any more. I had other operations while I was there, as well, so I am a bit bionic. I have not yet flown anywhere, and I am waiting to see what will happen to the metal detectors at the airport, because I have some stents that might cause some complications.

I was at the hospital this morning and they were pleased with my progress, so I am able to be back here in Parliament. I want to say thank you to all the staff—the consultants, the senior and junior doctors, the cleaners, the people who gave me my food, all the nursing staff, and the physiotherapists. They initially got me walking with a Zimmer frame, with oxygen cylinders first at 100% and eventually at 28%; they managed to get me to walk up some stairs, so I could be sent home. I pay tribute to them because it is a bit of a miracle that I am here today—I have been told that by at least two consultants. Most people who go into hospital with what happened to me do not come out, so every day from now on is a bonus.

I went in on a Friday night, in the early hours of Saturday morning—a weekend. We must not let anyone say we do not have a seven-days-a-week NHS. I have seen it. I have been cared for seven days a week, looked after and fed seven days a week, for two months. I have had the most excellent treatment. I have seen the 8 o'clock in the morning shift come on and then the 8 o'clock at night shift—12-hour shifts. I have seen the turnaround. Whether I was in the intensive care unit, the Charles Pannett ward or the Zachary Cope ward, I have seen the dedication and commitment of the staff. They come from all over the world. The nurses who treated me included a man called Riad, a Palestinian from Jordan, who was fascinated to know that I had been in Amman with the Foreign Affairs Committee four days before I went into hospital. There were nurses from Malaysia, the Philippines, Ireland, Ilford and many other places around the world.

The fact is that we in London depend on a pool of staff who have come to our city from all over the world to help us, to save us and to keep us well. We must never forget that. It is why the Home Office needs to understand that London's success as a global city depends on the workers in London being healthy. As Anne Rainsberry told us in the meeting with London Labour MPs the other day, 20% of the people treated in London do not live in London. London serves the whole community. The vascular facilities at St Mary's take patients from all over. I was told that even if I had had the heart problem in Ilford, I might still have been transferred to St Mary's. The unit has patients from Southend, Newport in south Wales and even from Gibraltar.

That indicates to me that we have to retain the staffing levels and level of expertise in our specialist hospitals and in our specialist departments within London hospitals. That is not possible, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) pointed out, if people cannot afford to live in London and if most newly trained nurses seek jobs elsewhere

within two or three years. It is not because they do not enjoy their work, but because they cannot afford or are fed up with two or three hours of travel every day.

We have to deal with the problem, and it requires the new Mayor of London, all our local authorities and the Government to look at it seriously. It also requires the Home Office, after the European referendum, to think again about the absurd position where we will cut off our nose to spite our face by making it impossible in a shortage period to recruit people to certain occupations because of the £35,000 threshold.

Paul Scully: The hon. Gentleman is making an incredibly powerful speech and I am grateful to hear about his personal experience. On the shortage of nurses, while it is preferable to train people domestically, does the hon. Gentleman agree that where we cannot fill those places, the shortage occupation list—it is devised by the Migration Advisory Committee, which has placed nurses on the list—goes some way to mitigating the £35,000 criteria?

Mike Gapes: The interesting thing is that NHS nurses were not originally on that shortage list. There had to be a lobbying campaign to get them put in because of the stupidity of the people in the Home Office who drew up the list. The fact is that the £35,000 figure will present a problem. Obviously, it will not present a problem in recruiting doctors from abroad, but it is a significant problem in recruiting nurses and other people at lower wage levels. We need to raise that issue, because it will be damaging in the long term.

Of course we need to train more nurses, but to do so the Government need a consistent policy. It takes several years to train a nurse. It is not something that can be switched on and switched off. The other issue is retention. Large numbers of nurses leave our NHS and go and work in other countries. Just as we take nurses from other countries, so British nurses go abroad. There is no reason why that should not be the case; it is a global health economy and the reality is that if we do not pay the lower paid staff in the NHS what they need, we will not recruit sufficient numbers of people to do those jobs.

Wes Streeting: In the context of the recruitment and retention challenges for NHS staff, does my hon. Friend share my concern and that of a number of Members from all parts of the House on the plans to charge nurses, midwives and students of allied health subjects full tuition fees and to remove the NHS bursary? Those things will be deeply damaging to recruitment of the very staff that we need to bring into the NHS.

Mike Gapes: Absolutely, I do agree. That is why I signed my hon. Friend's early-day motion today. I am about to put it in so that my name is added, now that I am back.

In conclusion, it is a great pleasure and a bit of a coincidence that this debate was here today, but I could not miss the opportunity to say thank you to those people who saved my life.

3.34 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck, but it is an even greater pleasure for all of us to see our

hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) back in his proper place in the House, doing what he does so well: representing his constituents.

I wish to make two points in this debate, and I am grateful for your indulgence, Ms Buck, in letting me come in at the end of the debate; I had other engagements. First, I wish to mention the case of Dr Chris Day v. NHS and Health Education England, which has exposed a particular lacuna in the protection for whistleblowers in the NHS. HEE oversees the training placement of doctors, and I understand that its role will increase under the new contracts. If a junior doctor blows the whistle, HEE will be able to terminate the doctor's training as a punishment with absolute impunity. I know that the Minister would not wish to see that and that she is keen to ensure that whistleblowers get appropriate protection. I simply ask that she looks at that issue and takes the necessary action to remedy it.

The main focus of my remarks is the recruitment process for GP surgeries in north-west London. Specifically, I refer to Integrated Health CIC, which is known locally as the Sudbury surgery, and the number of problems that have arisen with that and the commissioning thereof. In 2013, the surgery was given to two doctors, Dr Omodu and Dr Akumabor, until March 2016. In fact, the contract on the surgery expires in precisely seven days' time. I have been in correspondence with NHS England and Dr Anne Rainsberry, and the local council's health scrutiny committee has been in correspondence with Monitor, to try to ensure that the concerns of local people are respected in relation to the surgery and the procurement process, and that is what I want to bring to the Minister's attention.

There has been a lack of clarity in the handling of conflicts of interest in relation to the procurement. According to Brent CCG's website, in February this year, five of the seven local GPs who have declared interests in relation to their Brent CCG activity have interests in Harness, which is the name of another surgery. They include the chair and vice-chair of the CCG.

It is noted that the practices that have been removed from the commissioning timetable are also associated with Harness, and that in October, Harness Harlesden and Harness Acton Lane surgeries were withdrawn from the timetable. It was reported that they were to merge and procure a service from either current Harness Harlesden premises or from primary care hub. In March 2016, it was confirmed that Brent GP Access Centre, run by Harness, was also removed from the timetable to align it with the service start of the walk-in service contract, also run by Harness, that is provided on the same site, but is being procured and commissioned by the CCG. This is to reduce the chance of any confusion about accessing the services and to avoid any unnecessary disruption to either service. It would appear that Harness Locality, representing 21 of the 69 GP practices in Brent, has disproportionate representation on the CCG governing body. It is the belief of members of the scrutiny committee, and a concern of mine and of residents, that there needs to be clarity on commissioner-provider interrelationships to ensure a fair procurement process and the retention of public confidence in that process.

GP practice leaders have expressed misgivings about the ability of local practices to meet the demands of the London key performance indicators. It has been suggested to Members that the London KPI regime is intended to

favour larger bidders with the infrastructure to offer economies of scale. If that is the case, it puts NHS England and Brent CCG in direct conflict with residents in my constituency, especially in relation to the Sudbury surgery.

It is the clearly expressed opinion of local residents that the practice has served the community incredibly well, and they are extremely distressed, angry and puzzled by NHS England's treatment of it. To give an example of just how well regarded the surgery is locally, in the three years that the two doctors have been running it, its list has increased from 3,500 to more than 8,000. That is by word of mouth, and that is success in action. People are rightly concerned about how the surgery has been treated.

On 11 March, I received a letter from Dr Anne Rainsberry of NHS England, in which she confirmed to me that

"in undertaking the decision making processes with the local CCG related to this time limited contract, the NHS England standard operating procedure 'Managing the end of time limited contracts for primary medical services'... was followed."

She goes on in her letter to talk about key stages 1 and 2, which she says were

"completed to enable a decision on how the services should be provided after the end of the contract and to implement that decision."

I refer to stages 1 and 2 and the time standards for that contract. Stage 1 lists four requirements to be carried out a minimum of

"9 to 15 months before contract end (all essential)".

Those requirements are:

"Needs assessment...Value for money...Impact assessment... Consultation proposal."

The first contact that NHS England had with the surgery is noted in Dr Rainsberry's letter, in the fourth paragraph from the bottom of the second page, which states:

"NHS England wrote to the current contractors in September 2015 regarding their contract and the proposal to re-procure the contract when it expired."

On that page, she has outlined the fact that the procedure was not followed within the set time period. Yet on the first page of her letter, she told me that it was followed. That is not good enough.

Procurement does not have the confidence of local people or patients certainly in north-west London. I have enormous respect for the Minister—she is one of the Ministers I respect most across the House. She deals with things in a straightforward, plain-dealing manner. I urge her to look at the process I have outlined, because I do not think it has been done properly. I trust her to get it done right.

3.42 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): May I start by saying what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck? We have been colleagues here for nearly 20 years, and this is the first time I have spoken in a debate under your chairmanship. It really is a pleasure to see you in the Chair.

I was not going to contribute, but as we have some time before 4.30 pm, I thought I should take a little time to discuss one or two issues relating to my constituency

[Clive Efford]

and the situation in London. Most of London's hospital trusts are facing serious deficits, and this is an extremely worrying time for our national health service. When the London group of MPs met Dr Anne Rainsberry the other day, we asked her what the major sources of stress on our hospital trusts' budgets are. She said that there was a failure in planning for the number of nurses that the NHS was going to require, and that because not enough training places had been made available, not enough nurses were becoming available for employment in our hospital trusts, which in turn meant that the trusts were having to look to agency nurses.

I have spoken to a number of nurses who live in my constituency. They point out that, taking into account the stress they are working under in the NHS and the pressure that they come under from management, it is easier for them to work for an agency. As an agency nurse, they can manage their time more effectively, because they are not under direct management and pressure to work extremely long hours, and earn more money, because of the shortages. Meanwhile, our NHS bill for nurses—in some circumstances nurses who were formerly employed in the NHS but have chosen to work as agency nurses—is growing.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) said, the trusts could not recruit from overseas because nurses were not on the list of people whose professions allow them to come to the UK to work. That exacerbated the shortage and added to the demand for agency staff, and it is a major source of the problem. The lack of foresight and planning has led to this situation. Deficits are growing, and as I pointed out earlier, my local CCG is having to find savings of up to £1 in every £5 of its income to balance its budget. The knock-on effect on partnership working, for example on long-term care in the community, is frightening.

I shall not take much longer, but I want to discuss a couple of local matters. I have been advised by a local councillor that one of my local GP practices was summarily closed over the weekend. There was no notice or advice; the Care Quality Commission went in and literally put a stop notice on the practice. There are 3,800 patients at that practice. I am the locally elected Member of Parliament; can the Minister tell me why no one has been in touch with me to explain what is going on? What on earth is going on? Why do I not know about it? Why has no one from the CCG been in touch with me? Why have I not had an explanation of what will happen to my constituents because the surgery has been closed? I am really angry about this. I accept that the Minister cannot answer me right now, but will she look into the matter? I would like to hear why Members of Parliament are being overlooked in such circumstances, because I am elected to represent my constituents.

The surgery has been closed. We are told that additional resources are being made available to a neighbouring surgery—I will not name it now, but I will talk to the Minister after the debate—but what does that mean? As I understand it, the surgery that has been closed has to turn its service around within six months. How does it do that if it has been closed? What does that mean for the patients? What services are being moved into the neighbouring surgery? There are all sorts of questions.

Who is communicating with my constituents? Do I get a copy of any letters, so that I know what is going on? The Minister really should look into the situation.

We have a right to be kept informed in such circumstances, because we are talking about a public service. Some 3,800 people are affected, most of whom are probably my constituents, and I would really like to be kept informed and know what is going on. I would be grateful if the Minister told whoever has failed to keep me informed to keep me informed from now on, and to take that point on board, so that in future other Members are kept informed of such serious matters in their constituencies.

We can look at the consequences of the savings that my CCG has to make. I have been in my constituency for many years as a councillor and as an elected Member of Parliament—I am in my 30th year as an elected representative of one type or another in my local community. There is an estate in my constituency on the border with Lewisham. More than 20 years ago, the local district health authority closed the doctors' surgery on that estate because it was a single practice, and it was moved in with another practice. That left the people there with no direct access to a GP surgery. A lot of the patients affected lived on the border, so they went to GP surgeries in Lewisham.

Later, in partnership with the health authority, a local regeneration programme paid for a nurse-led practice on that estate to provide support to elderly people and families. As part of the cuts, the Source, on the Horn Park estate, now faces closure, which will yet again leave the community with no health services on that estate. That is completely unacceptable. People will have to travel a long distance to the nearest service if the Source is closed.

The CCG says that a number of the patients affected are from Lewisham, but they are not; they are actually from Greenwich, but they are considered Lewisham NHS patients. It is madness that they are to be penalised for living too close to the border with the neighbouring borough. That is just another failure in the planning of our health services. I hope the Minister will take that issue on board.

3.51 pm

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I know that, on another day, you would be participating in this debate yourself. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on securing the debate and for introducing it in an engaging and wide-ranging way. I commend the excellent contributions of my hon. Friends the Members for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) and for Eltham (Clive Efford). They all expressed their concerns about the quality of care that their constituents receive. It is really good to see my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South back and to hear his reflections on his experience of the seven-day service. I am not medically qualified, but I want to offer him a bit of advice to help his continued recovery: he should limit his time on Twitter.

Many of us in this Chamber have discussed the NHS in London previously. I cannot but reflect on the fact that, back in 2010, when I was first elected to this place, the NHS was hardly ever raised with me on the doorstep, but at the previous election it came up on every road that I canvassed. It is clear from the many contributions today that the NHS in London is under real pressure. We heard about the huge financial pressure, crumbling buildings and difficulty accessing GP services—and that was just from the Conservative Members.

As a London MP, I know that some of the health challenges that our city faces are specific to the capital. Others, such as the rising hospital deficits and declining staff morale, are symptomatic of problems that affect the whole country and can be traced back to decisions made by this Government and their coalition predecessor.

Let me start with the issues that are specific to London. London is a fast-growing city. More than 1 million more people are living here in 2016 than in 2006. The birth rate is higher in London than in almost every other major European city. London is a city of huge economic contrasts. Some of the wealthiest parts of the country are here, and also some of the poorest.

The vicious cycle that links poverty and poor health is all too evident in the advice surgeries that London MPs hold weekly or fortnightly. Overcrowded, damp housing and low incomes cause depression and anxiety, which place significant strain on the mental health system and the NHS more broadly. London contains diverse communities with different needs, from City workers dealing with stress to recent migrants from war-torn countries, so the NHS in London faces multiple and complicated challenges.

The huge contrast that characterises our city also creates problems in the delivery of health services. The lack of affordable housing, which my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch mentioned, and the instability of the rental market makes staff recruitment and retention a particular challenge. The London Health Commission found that NHS staff cited the high cost of living and the lack of affordable housing as two of the biggest barriers to living and working in London.

The sister of a very good friend of mine used to work as a cancer nurse at the Royal Marsden. She lived outside London and commuted into Clapham Junction by train. She then cycled from Clapham Junction because she could not afford the fare to a zone 1 station. Her daily round trip took four hours. It is probably no surprise that she has now moved to a new job in Huddersfield.

Nurses in my constituency rent single rooms in flats, so they can live close to the hospitals where they work. Nurses with families are desperate for social housing because private rents are unaffordable and owning a property is a pipe dream for them. We should use the NHS's large footprint to solve that problem.

Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend underlines my concerns. Is she also concerned about the advent of PropCo? It took land away from Hackney, and we now have no control of it locally. It would do more for health outcomes to turn that hospital land into good-quality housing, rather than luxury flats, which are unfortunately becoming the norm in Hackney.

Heidi Alexander: I entirely agree. We need to look at how we can use the NHS estate to provide more affordable housing for key workers and NHS staff, in particular.

A related issue is the quality of the buildings in which healthcare is delivered. London has some state-of-the-art hospitals but, because of the property prices, some of the poorest-quality GP premises. Some of our facilities look like the first-class lounges at international airports, while others look like unloved community centres. According to figures I obtained recently in answer to a parliamentary question, that difference in quality could get worse. Hospitals in London face a £1.2 billion backlog for key maintenance and repairs, including a £150 million bill for high-risk repairs, which the NHS should address as an urgent priority to prevent catastrophic failure. It might sound like that problem should concern only NHS property managers, but that backlog will have a negative impact on the NHS's ability to provide high-quality, safe and effective care for patients.

A review of Care Quality Commission inspection reports found hospitals in London with A&E equipment that is a year out of date, and heating that had been left broken for 10 months before being repaired. I do not blame hospital bosses for that situation; I blame Ministers for underfunding them. Rather than an investment in the NHS's infrastructure, last week's Budget included a £1.1 billion cut to its capital funding to pay for those repairs. The money is being switched to revenue budgets instead. That might plug a short-term gap on the NHS spreadsheets, but it does nothing to improve the quality of care that Londoners experience. As a number of hon. Members said, capital investment is essential when services are being reconfigured.

London's NHS faces specific problems. At the same time, it also faces the enormous challenges that affect the whole country. How do we improve morale among a workforce who feel stretched to breaking point? How do we provide high-quality care when, despite what Ministers claim, the NHS faces its toughest funding settlement in a generation? How do we ensure that vulnerable older people are treated with dignity and respect when the budgets that pay for their care are being slashed?

A&E performance is often said to be a barometer for how the health service in general is performing. That is because a well-functioning A&E depends on accessible GP services, the availability of social care and adequate numbers of clinical staff. If we look at the latest A&E performance figures for London, however, they show a bleak picture. The number of people attending A&E has barely changed in recent years—perhaps surprisingly—but the number of people waiting longer than four hours in emergency departments has increased fivefold.

To quote the figures, in the third quarter of 2009-10, under the previous Labour Government, 20,000 patients waited longer than four hours to be seen in A&E; fast-forward six years and in the third quarter of 2015-16, the figure was almost 100,000. When we talk about national performance in A&Es, Ministers try to explain that away by claiming that more people go to A&E, but their claim is simply not borne out by the facts in London. The reality is that focusing solely on the number of people going to A&E is missing the point. We must also focus on the type of person going to A&E.

[Heidi Alexander]

It is fair to say that in the past six months I have visited more hospitals in London than in the previous 40 years. From all those visits, one image sticks in my mind: hospital wards full of disorientated, frail, older people, many of whom should not be in hospital, and would not be had appropriate care been available for them in their home or community. I am clear—we cannot solve the crisis in our NHS until we solve the crisis in our social care system. That is as true of London as it is of anywhere. Furthermore, A&E is not alone in being under pressure; we can see the same problems affecting the ambulance service, primary care and mental health services.

In the 19th century, London led the way in how we responded to some of the major health challenges facing the world. In this century, London has fallen behind, and other cities are taking some of the bold and radical action necessary to improve health services and to help people live healthier lives. With the right leadership and the political will, London has an opportunity to be that world-leading city once more. I look forward to hearing what the Minister, who is also a London MP, has to say.

4.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): It is a pleasure to respond to a debate under your chairmanship, Ms Buck, I think for the first time.

The debate has been extraordinarily rich, with many excellent speeches from my fellow London Members of Parliament. We have a reasonable amount of time left, so I will try to respond to as many points as I can, but certainly on some I would prefer to write a response after the debate. In particular, I would not wish to give my friend, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, anything but the best information, so I will write to her afterwards about some of the details.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on securing the debate with cross-party support. I echo the words of the shadow Secretary of State: it is a great pleasure to see the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) back in this place. He made typically generous remarks about the NHS staff who cared for him, and we, too, thank them, because he is a popular Member in all parts of the House. We are delighted to see him back.

I am a London MP, so the debate is about my constituents as well. Rightly, hon. Members have taken this important opportunity to champion their local populations and their healthcare needs. However, some consistent threads have run through many of the speeches, in particular on the long-term strategic direction given the nature of London and its population. As well as responding to specific points, I want to give Members a sense of the strategic direction that the NHS wants to take in London, and some of the thinking around that.

The NHS in London serves a population of more than 8 million and spent £18 billion last year. As the shadow Secretary of State and others have said, London's population is younger than the national average and more mobile, and its transient nature often makes continuity of care harder to achieve. In Battersea, I represent the youngest seat in England, and I see that transient, mobile population all the time, whether they are shift

workers or young professionals. There are wide variations between and within boroughs in the health of the population, life expectancy and the quality of healthcare.

I will not attempt to respond to all the detailed points that have been made about housing, immigration and some of other wider determinants of health, but I fully acknowledge the interaction of all such important factors when it comes to the health of our constituents, and those factors are rightly at the forefront of the ongoing mayoral election campaign. It is inconceivable that the next Mayor of London, whoever is elected, will not have right at the top of their agenda issues such as housing in London, especially for key workers and the people who keep our important public services going. That is entirely right. I acknowledge that some of the issues that have been highlighted are important for the future of London. The population of London is projected to increase to more than 9 million by 2020, with the largest proportional increase expected in the over-65 age group. Members clearly know what that means for the increasing demand for healthcare.

The leaders of the national health and care bodies in England have set out steps to help local organisations plan over the next six years to deliver a sustainable, transformed health service. I accept that there was controversy in the last Parliament, and that the majority of Members present in the Chamber today disagreed with many of the measures enacted. Nevertheless, we have since had a general election and a majority Conservative Government were elected, having stood on the NHS architecture as it is. At the heart of the Conservative manifesto was an acceptance of the NHS in England's own plan for its future, the five-year forward view. In a fixed-term Parliament, that gives us the opportunity for a stable system, which can look ahead across five years at how it provides sustainable and transformed services.

As in previous years, NHS organisations will be required to produce individual operational plans for the next financial year. Obviously, that work has happened for 2016-17. In addition, every health and care system will be required, for the first time, to work together to produce a sustainability and transformation plan, which is a separate but connected strategic plan covering October 2016 to March 2021. Many Members have highlighted the frustrations felt between the acute sector and CCGs, and some of the other stresses and strains between the different parts of the system. This year will be the first time that the NHS has required all parts of the local health and social care system to sit down together to draw up a five-year plan. That is strategically important in understanding how the system responds.

Those local plans represent an ambitious local blueprint for implementing NHS England's five-year forward view locally. My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) and many others talked about the need for long-term planning.

Meg Hillier: I thank the Minister for giving way, because I know she is trying to cover a lot of ground. Long-term planning is sensible, but is she not concerned about a five-year plan when at the same time major transformation is being required of acute hospital trusts through NHS Improvement—again, not a problem in itself, except that it is to be in very short order? Is there not a contradiction between a five-year plan and the short-order demands of the improvement plan for trusts, just to make their books balance?

Jane Ellison: I do not accept how the hon. Lady characterises that. Clearly, there is an interaction between action now and action in the next few years—that is part of how we plan for the future—but, as I said, I will respond to some of the more detailed points in writing. I know that she has examined the matter in some detail in the Public Accounts Committee, with civil servants, Simon Stevens and some of my parliamentary colleagues.

The NHS needs to work beyond the boundaries of individual organisations and sectors. All Members in all parts of the House agree about the need, for example, for health and social care to be further integrated. That process began under the better care fund, but the fact that we need more of it was in all parties' manifestos. Together with the additional investment that has been made available, the plans are intended to ensure better health for local people, transform the quality of care delivery and, crucially, ensure the sustainable financial position to which a number of Members referred.

That approach represents a step change in strategic planning at the local level, moving away from the year-to-year cycle. However, there is no one-size-fits-all template. London will be covered by a total of five footprint areas, which are geographic areas in which people and organisations will work together to create a clear overall vision and plan for their own area. As Members have eloquently illustrated in their contributions, one sometimes finds different parts of a local system in tension with each other, so it is vital that we sit down and understand how the pathway can become seamless for the individual. We will learn a lot from some of the vanguards in devolution areas such as Greater Manchester.

The NHS's financial position is undoubtedly challenging. No one would dispute that, least of all me, but it is important to recognise that despite the difficult decisions the Government have had to take, we have chosen to prioritise funding for the NHS. That is why we have committed an additional £10 billion over the lifetime of the Parliament, starting with £2 billion this year. Simon Stevens has been clear that he asked for an amount of money and that is what he got. He also asked for a certain weighting in the spending review settlement, with front-loaded money to drive transformation, and the money has been set up with that structure.

I am a London MP, too, so I do not want the debate to be confrontational. I share many of the concerns that have been raised today. Everyone acknowledges that in London the health system in general is under pressure, for many unique reasons, but I gently point out to the shadow Secretary of State that while she listed many challenges, and many other Members did the same, she did not list that many solutions. At the general election, the Labour party did not pledge to give the NHS the shortfall it had identified in its funding. That is significant, and I need to put it on the record.

Dr Huq: Will the Minister give way?

Heidi Alexander: Will the Minister give way?

Jane Ellison: No, I will press on, particularly as the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton, who introduced the debate, took half an hour for her opening speech. I will give way if I have time towards the end. It is a matter of record that we committed—*[Interruption.]*

All right, I give way to the shadow Secretary of State, if she would like to remind us of what the Labour party pledged at the election.

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful that, when making a political point, the Minister is happy to give way to the shadow Front Bencher.

We have been clear that we would always have given the NHS every penny that it needs. However, the calculations for the five-year forward view were predicated on social care being properly funded and there being no further cuts to the public health budget. I think Simon Stevens would say that those two things are essential if we are to deliver a sustainable NHS. Will the Minister therefore tell me how much money her Government took out of adult social care in the previous Parliament?

Jane Ellison: We have been clear that we have given a large amount: £3.5 billion has been made available to local authorities for social care. Ditto on public health—we will spend £16 billion over the next five years. If I have time, I will come to the good point that was made earlier about the move to business rates retention. It is matter of record that the Government committed at the election to what the NHS had asked for in the five-year forward view, and we will continue to make that commitment.

The London health system—CCGs and provider trusts—has planned for a deficit in 2015-16 of about £350 million, and overall the system is expected to be in that position. Some recovery is expected during 2016-17, and I am sure we will debate that again. In addition, a £1.8 billion sustainability and transformation fund is available, designed to address provider deficits in 2016-17. However, I think all Members would accept that additional Government spending is not the only answer to the challenges faced by the NHS. We have taken action with our arm's length bodies to support local organisations to make efficiency savings and reduce their deficits, but much of the change Members have talked about is driven by desire to get better healthcare rather than to make savings. If we can make savings as well, that is all to the good, because we can reinvest them in great healthcare.

In London, from early April, the new NHS Improvement body will be providing additional expert support and capacity to trusts experiencing particular financial challenges. That support will include identifying and implementing financial improvement and helping them to identify savings to put them in a stronger position to maintain those savings.

Let me talk about the pressures on urgent and emergency care. It is acknowledged that the urgent and emergency care system faces increasing pressure. More and more people are visiting A&E departments and minor injury units, which is stretching their ability to cope. Members listed some reasons for that in their speeches. A lot of visits are unavoidable, but some people are visiting because of inconsistent management of long-term health conditions, difficulty in getting a GP appointment or insufficient information on where to go.

Winter sees an even bigger rise in visitor numbers and pressure on staff. Although the debate inevitably dwelled on Members' concerns about their local healthcare systems and problems in them, I am sure we all want to place on record our huge thanks and praise, as many

[Jane Ellison]

have, to the staff of London's NHS, who work extremely hard under a lot of pressure and delivering some really good results against that backdrop. I will come on to that.

London's A&E units have been significantly challenged this winter, and that has been reflected in performance. However, despite those pressures, the capital's urgent and emergency care system has proved its resilience, with fewer serious incidents declared than in previous years. This winter, London accounted for just three out of 625 serious incidents declared across England. It is important to praise the staff in saying that.

In January, London's performance was significantly higher than all other regions, with 90% of patients seen within the four-hour A&E standard. London is also the highest-performing region in England this year to date, with 93.1% of patients seen within the four-hour standard. My thanks and congratulations on that improved performance go to the hard-working staff of London's services.

Reconfiguration schemes have loomed large in the debate. The health needs of people in London are changing and demands on health services are increasing. The hon. Member for Ilford South in his excellent speech illustrated through his personal stories some of the reasons for the changes in the shape of our health service in terms of how we are investing in specialist services and centres of excellence. The work done to centralise stroke expertise was brought up earlier in the debate. I remind Members, although many will remember, that those changes were bitterly opposed by many people. I am not sure whether that includes anyone in the Chamber, but it certainly includes campaign groups. However, all our London clinicians now say with certainty that those changes, with centralised expertise and specialist care, have saved many lives. That is always worth reflecting on.

People are living longer, the population as a whole is getting older and there are more patients with chronic conditions. We often say that people are living longer, but we forget to say that they are living with chronic conditions for longer, and that presents a longer-term challenge than might be seen at first sight. Heart disease, diabetes and dementia will all increase as they are conditions associated with an ageing population.

We did not dwell on the prevention agenda, but I was delighted that the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) spoke about it. The shadow Secretary of State also touched on it when she mentioned dementia and the problems we all know of older people in hospitals. I urge her to look at the dementia implementation plan we published on 6 March, which is a detailed response to the Prime Minister's 2020 challenge. Dementia has sat in my portfolio since the election, and that plan is a detailed look at how we deliver against that challenge and in particular at the joined-up care that is key to ensuring that people with dementia have safer and better care in our system and are kept out of the acute sector whenever that is possible.

In a number of areas across the capital, the local NHS has concluded that the way it has organised its hospitals and primary care in the past will not best meet the needs of the future. We are clear that the reconfiguration of front-line health services is a matter for the local NHS, tailored to meet the local population's needs.

I was glad to hear that Members recently met with Anne Rainsberry. The Members who came to the cross-party "Shaping a Healthier Future" meeting last summer will know it is vital that officials at all levels and NHS managers engage with elected Members. I was therefore disappointed to hear what the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) said. I will ask my officials to look into that. A number of Members asked reasonable questions about why they could not have certain bits of information. I have some specific answers and it may be that we can take a moment after the debate and I will point them in the right direction.

Andy Slaughter: I am grateful for what the Minister has said. If she could give an indication to health officials that we must have an open review of where we are with "Shaping a Healthier Future", look at the implementation of the business plan and consider the Mansfield commission report, which really just asks questions along those lines, it would be very useful indeed.

Jane Ellison: We have had the time, during a three-hour debate, to make inquiries, so I will perhaps give the hon. Gentleman an update afterwards.

There have been a lot of references to the interaction with Members. Members of any party may feel they are knocking their heads against a brick wall, but sometimes, to be fair, information cannot be shared for good reasons. There may be commercial confidentiality, or things may be at a particular stage where information cannot be shared. However, I am quite clear that all plans for the local populations that Members represent must be shared with the best level of detail possible, at the most opportune moment. I am always happy to hear from London Members if they feel that that is not happening.

Reconfiguration is about modernising the delivery of care and facilities. I recognise that proposals for those changes sometimes arouse concern. There has been a particular focus on "Shaping a Healthier Future" in this debate, but under that programme, many more community services are now in place across all eight boroughs, so more patients can be seen closer to home. Eleven new primary care hubs are now open. Improved access to GP services has meant an additional 32,000 appointments in Ealing since August 2015, while weekend appointments are now offered to more than 1 million patients across north-west London. Rapid access services in each borough are helping to keep patients with long-term conditions out of hospital where possible, which has already prevented 2,700 hospital admissions in Brent alone.

Dr Huq: Will the Minister give way?

Jane Ellison: I will not, if the hon. Lady will forgive me, because I think she is going to have a moment to speak at the end, if I can allow it. She gave a half-hour opening speech, which is a little longer than I have to respond, so I will press on.

The Mansfield commission report, which I have read, has been referenced. The costs stated in that independent health commission report are not from the NHS and are not recognised by the NHS. In terms of the response, the unanimous conclusion of the north-west London clinical board was that the commission's report offered no substantive clinical evidence or credible alternative to consider that would lead to better outcomes for

patients than the plan the NHS has put in place. That plan enjoys an extraordinary level of clinical support, and it is important to say that that unanimous clinical support has been sustained. The financial impact of significant delay and challenge cannot be dismissed, and I know Members are aware of that.

Members have rightly focused on primary care. We all know the important role that primary care in London will play in helping us to meet the significant challenges we face. There are still a large number of single-handed GP practices in London. A significant number of GPs are approaching retirement age, and in some London boroughs, patient list turnover is as high as 37% in a year. The Government have made a number of important commitments on improving primary care. In June 2015, the Secretary of State set out details of a new deal for general practice. In London, the transformation of primary care is being planned and implemented with the support of local resources and a pan-London transformation team. More than £40 million has been invested in primary care transformation in the capital this year.

The GP access fund has accelerated delivery in some areas of London. For example, 700,000 patients in Barking, Havering and Redbridge now have the opportunity to see a GP in the evenings, and 305,000 patients in south-east London have seven-days-a-week access to GPs via new primary care hubs. Some important measures are being invested in and taken forward, but we acknowledge that we need to do more in those areas.

Members have raised a number of concerns about trusts in special measures. I reiterate that those trusts are receiving support to ensure they have in place the strong leadership they need to implement their improvement plans. It was good to hear an expression of support from the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) for local leadership in that regard.

We have touched very little on mental health services in London, which I know is not because Members do not think it is important; we all want to drive towards the parity of esteem that is rightly this Government's aspiration. In March 2015, the London mental health transformation board was established to support the development and delivery of projects to improve the mental health of Londoners. I do not have time to go into local examples of how that is beginning to make a difference, but they are important and making progress.

I have talked about the integration of health and social care. There are 25 integrated care pioneer sites developing and testing new and different ways of joining up those two important services. In Waltham Forest and east London, services are focused on keeping patients at home, providing care close to home and, if patients are admitted to hospital, getting them home as quickly as possible. In Islington, the local health and social care network is providing a named professional to take responsibility for the co-ordination of the patient's care plan, with a view to providing the seamless, co-ordinated and proactive care that we want to see particularly for our most vulnerable patients.

In the time left to me, I will try to address one or two particular points raised. I have said that I will look to respond in more detail to points made by the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch on the McKinsey report and the issues around NHS land. One Member mentioned in an intervention the recruitment of nurses and the position of the MAC.

The hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) made important points about the particular needs of our poorest populations. Like many hon. Members, my seat in Battersea has everything, from very wealthy to very poor people and everything in between—that's London. She talked about the need to invest in prevention. This week, we saw the national diabetes prevention programme launched, which is the first at-scale intervention of its kind in the world. We are also working on important areas, such as a new tobacco plan.

A number of Members touched on the issue of public health budgets when we move to business rates retention. Of course we need to get the balance right, to ensure we continue to bear down on health inequalities. I would be happy to have further discussions, but I reassure Members that we are very conscious of that in the Department of Health and will be doing work to address it. Important points were also made by the hon. Member for Edmonton about North Middlesex hospital. She rightly mentioned that key safety issues are being addressed there by some of the local leaders.

I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who has had to go to the main Chamber, talked about the transformed performance at Northwick Park hospital. It is right to shine a light where we see such improved performance, and I know that the staff very much appreciate it. It was good to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam that his mother had great service. He also illustrated the sometimes unintended consequences of local healthcare campaigns, which he has seen at close hand.

I want to give an assurance that the Department's capital settlement meets the needs of the NHS and allows the Department to continue with priority public capital projects and support delivery on the five-year forward view over the coming years. St Helier was mentioned on a number of occasions. In anticipation of all the plans there, further work is going on around their affordability, and that ongoing work is important.

The hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) made quite a detailed point that I will, of course, look into. We have the recess to look back at *Hansard* and pick up some of the many detailed points made in this debate. Many notes were being written behind me, and we will look to come back to Members.

There will be things that I have not quite been able to capture, but I give fellow London Members my reassurance that I am always happy to talk to them. I would rather they talk to me at an early stage if they are concerned about something. We share many of the same challenges, but we also share the same ambition: to have the very best healthcare for our local residents. This Government are determined to invest in the NHS to be able to deliver on that. With that, I leave the hon. Lady a minute to close the debate.

4.29 pm

Dr Huq: It is a shame you were not here to take part in what has been a really good debate, Ms Buck, in which all three parties in London have been represented. I think everyone agrees that the stand-out contribution was from my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes)—the bionic Member for Ilford South. The point I was going to make in an intervention—I was worried I would not have time to make it—is this. Everyone recognises the Minister is a thoughtful person and not really a Conservative because—

Jane Ellison: Can *Hansard* record that that is not true?

Dr Huq: She is not a robotic one of those; I think people recognise that she is not a robot. She made the point a few times that we should not use this issue as a political football and we should want the best for everyone.

Some of the people I quoted in my speech are not Labour party members. Michael Mars is the chair of Ealing synagogue. He came for a visit this week and pointed out that managerial culture is stifling what the—

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Thursday 24 March 2016

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Help to Grow

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): The help to grow (“H2G”) pilot programme was announced by the Prime Minister in February 2015. Drawing on research undertaken by the British Business Bank (“BBB”), Government committed to address an identified finance gap for fast growing, innovative SMEs by using the Government’s balance sheet to guarantee loans by private lenders and by co-investing public money alongside private money to bring new lenders to the market. These SMEs are vital to the UK economy and are major drivers of employment and wealth for the country. Ensuring they have access to the right type of finance at the right time is essential to ensure they maximise their growth potential.

Following the pilot announcement and extensive market engagement, BBB has developed three products to test in tackling the identified gap. These are two guarantee products and an option for co-investment in funds. The first contract with a delivery partner will be exchanged shortly. The pilot is expected to last two years and anticipates supporting in the region of £200 million total new lending under H2G. The pilot will be evaluating the appropriateness of the design of the three lending products within H2G alongside lenders’ ability to successfully originate eligible H2G loans.

H2G will support SMEs seeking growth investment between £0.5 million to £2 million for developing new products, processes or services, research and innovation, and expansion into new markets.

The two guarantee products being piloted will give rise to a contingent liability which under managing public money principles require notifying to both Houses. These liabilities will arise when beneficiary SME’s default on their loan repayments and the delivery partner is unable to recover the capital despite reasonable commercial steps being taken to pursue the debt. A departmental minute has been laid concurrently in both Houses which provides further detail on these liabilities.

Subject to the findings of the pilot programme, the intention will be to roll H2G out further in order to ensure innovative, ambitious and growing UK SME’s can continue to be able to access this vital funding.

[HCWS661]

CABINET OFFICE

Elections: Conduct Guidance

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Matthew Hancock): As is normal, ahead of the forthcoming elections, guidance has today been issued for civil servants in UK Government Departments and those working in arm’s length bodies on the principles that they should observe in relation to the conduct of

Government business in the run up to the forthcoming elections on 5 May 2016 to the Scottish Parliament; the National Assembly for Wales; the Northern Ireland Assembly; to some local authorities in England, including for the directly elected Mayors of London, Bristol, Liverpool and Salford; and for police and crime commissioners in England and Wales.

The guidance sets out the need to maintain the political impartiality of the civil service, and the need to ensure that public resources are not used for party political purposes during this period. The period of sensitivity preceding the local, mayoral and police and crime commissioner elections starts on 14 April, and in relation to the devolved Administrations from 24 March for the elections to the Scottish Parliament; 30 March for the Northern Ireland Assembly; and 6 April for the National Assembly for Wales.

Copies of the guidance have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and on the Cabinet Office website at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/election-guidance-for-civil-servants>

Attachments can be viewed online at:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-03-24/HCWS652/>

[HCWS652]

Cyber-Security

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Matthew Hancock): In the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review the Government confirmed that we would invest £1.9 billion over the next five years in protecting the UK from cyber-attack and developing our sovereign capabilities in cyber space, including by creating a national cyber centre.

The new National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) will open in October 2016. As part of GCHQ, the NCSC will bring together a number of cyber security functions from across Government. It is intended that the current functions of CERT-UK, currently part of the Cabinet Office, will move into the NCSC. Detailed design work is underway on implementing the NCSC, and I will update the House further in due course.

[HCWS653]

TREASURY

Contingencies Fund Advance: UK Government Investments Ltd

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): In May 2015 the Chancellor announced that the Shareholder Executive (ShEx) and UK Financial Investments (UKFI) were to be brought together under a single holding company, UK Government Investments (UKGI). UKGI was incorporated on 11 September 2015 and will commence operations from 1 April 2016.

The resources and cash to finance UKGI’s spending will form part of HM Treasury’s main estimate for 2016-17. Parliamentary authority enabling UKGI to be funded is included in the Enterprise Bill which is currently before Parliament but is yet to receive Royal Assent.

Parliamentary approval for resources of £12,100,000 for this new service will be sought in the main estimate for HM Treasury. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £2,400,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS662]

ECOFIN

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council was held in Brussels on 8 March 2016. EU Finance Ministers discussed the following items:

Mandatory automatic exchange of information in the field of taxation

The Council held a discussion on a presidency compromise text on the Commission's proposal to amend the directive with regards to the mandatory exchange of information in the field of taxation as part of the EU taking forward the recommendations from the OECD.

Current legislative proposals

The presidency gave an update to the Council on the state of play of financial services dossiers.

State of play of the banking union

The Commission provided an update on several dossiers linked to the banking union: the single resolution fund, the bank recovery and resolution directive and the deposit guarantee scheme directive. The presidency also provided a short update on progress to establish a European deposit insurance scheme, which the UK is not participating in.

Fiscal sustainability report 2015

Ministers adopted conclusions outlining the Council's position on the Commission's fiscal sustainability report.

Follow-up to the G20 Meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors on 26-27 February 2016

Following the first G20 of the Chinese presidency in Shanghai on 26-27 February, the Commission and the ECOFIN chair debriefed Ministers on discussions.

European semester 2016: implementation of country-specific recommendations drawing on the country reports and in-depth reviews

The Commission reported to ECOFIN on the implementation of 2015 country-specific recommendations with a particular focus on removing the barriers to investment, following the publication of the country reports, published 26 February.

[HCWS656]

Financial Services Update

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): I can today confirm that I have laid a Treasury Minute informing the House of a reduction in HM Treasury's contingent liabilities to Bradford & Bingley.

The Treasury Minute concerns the guarantee arrangements announced on 29 September 2008 that put in place arrangements in relation to wholesale borrowings and deposits. At March 2015 the maximum contingent liability to HM Treasury on this guarantee arrangement was £2.4 billion.

I can confirm that, following the repurchase of two outstanding Bradford & Bingley covered bonds, the maximum exposure to HM Treasury under this guarantee arrangement has fallen to around £1.5 billion.

If the remaining liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

I will update the House of any further changes to Bradford & Bingley associated guarantee arrangements as necessary.

[HCWS663]

National Reform Programme

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): On 24 March, the Government published the UK 2016 national reform programme. The document was sent to the European Commission, as part of the European semester.

National Reform Programme

Under Council recommendation 2010/410 of 13 July 2010, member states send national reform programmes each year, which report to the Commission on their structural reforms and plans.

The UK 2016 national reform programme reports on actions taken by the UK as a whole, including by the Government and by the devolved Administrations where policy responses are of a devolved competence.

The 2016 national reform programme:

- puts the UK's structural reforms in the context of deficit reduction, the 2015 autumn statement and Budget 2014

- reports on the broad macroeconomic context

- reports on policies to tackle the three country-specific recommendations addressed to the UK by the June 2015 European Council: correcting the deficit, boosting housing supply, and addressing skills mismatches and improving the availability of childcare

- sets out the UK's approach to national monitoring, in line with the five headline Europe 2020 targets agreed by the European Council in June 2010.

The national reform programme is based heavily on the announcements and forecasts of Budget 2016 and the autumn statement and spending review 2015. It is, furthermore, drawn entirely from information already in the public domain.

A copy of the document has been deposited in the House of Commons Library and is available on the Treasury website.

[HCWS664]

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Coastal Communities Fund

The Minister for Communities and Resilience (Mr Mark Francois): I am pleased to announce today the publication of the "Coastal Communities Fund Annual Progress Report 2015".

The report sets out the impressive achievements of the fund across the UK since it was launched in 2012. It shows the many and varied ways our coastal and seaside

towns are rising to the challenges they face to diversify and transform their economies, and strengthen their appeal as places to live, work and visit.

Over 200 projects supported by the fund UK-wide have received £120 million to date and are also attracting significant amounts of co-funding, over £200 million so far. As the report highlights, every £1 we invest has the potential to create a boost of up to £8 to our coastal economies.

The recent decision to extend the fund by a further £90 million over four years to 2020-21 will help secure the long-term future of our seaside towns so that communities can drive forward their vision, unleash business opportunities and prosperity. The next round of bidding will commence in the summer of 2016.

I have today written to all coastal MPs in the UK, and to all 118 coastal community teams in England, with a web link to the published report.

The report can be found on the gov.uk website at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coastal-communities-fund-annual-progress-report-2015>

I have placed a copy in the Library of the House.

[HCWS657]

DEFENCE

Defence Estate Rationalisation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): The Ministry of Defence (MOD) is currently developing an ambitious programme of estate rationalisation which will provide a plan for a smaller, but significantly better defence estate to meet the needs of the armed forces as set out in the strategic defence and security review 2015. This strategic review of the defence estate will provide a more efficient and better infrastructure laydown in support of military capability for future generations. The MOD expects to announce the final results of this review in the autumn of 2016 but can today confirm the expected release of 10 sites, shown in the table below. The release of these sites supports the generation of £1 billion through land sales and, in part, supports the contribution of up to 55,000 homes to support wider Government targets within this Parliament.

These sites also contribute to the Government commitment to provide land for 160,000 homes to be built in this Parliament. The intent to dispose of these 10 sites is estimated to provide some £140 million in land sales receipts and land to provide up to 7,000 homes—of which 6,000 is expected in this Parliament—in addition to the land for up to 15,000 homes announced on 18 January 2016.

The Department seeks to provide a future basing structure for the defence estate across the UK. It aims to better support military capability and force generation; allow the formation of clusters of sites which facilitate the collocation of similar functions and thereby reduce running costs through shared resources; as well as dispose of under-utilised sites for which there is no longer a long-term defence requirement.

I acknowledge that these moves will have an impact upon civilian and military staff. Over the coming months further work, carried out in consultation with all stakeholders including staff associations and the families federations, will determine the future provision for the occupants of these sites. Details on the sequencing and timing of these moves will be established this autumn. The MOD will continue to engage with impacted local authorities to determine how the Department's assessment of housing unit allocation against each site may be considered as part of the authority's local plan. I will make a further announcement later this year.

List of Defence sites for potential disposal

<i>Site</i>	<i>Constituency and MP</i>	<i>Proposed Release Date</i>	<i>Housing Unit Potential (Up to)</i>
Burgoyne Barracks (Part of Shorncliffe Barracks, Folkestone)	Damian Collins (Conservative) Folkestone and Hythe	By 2020	265
Clive Barracks (Tern Hill, Shropshire)	Owen Paterson (Conservative) North Shropshire	By 2020	600
Fitz Wygram House—Royal Army Vet Corps (Aldershot)	Sir Gerald Howarth (Conservative) Aldershot	By 2020	15
Army Officer Selection Board Westbury (Wiltshire)	Dr Andrew Murrison (Conservative) South West Wiltshire	By 2020	98
Defence Training Estate Land near Cove, East of Fleet (Farnborough)	Spanning the constituencies of both Ranil Jayawardena (Conservative) North East Hampshire and Sir Gerald Howarth (Conservative) Aldershot	By 2020	20
Rylston Road Army Reserves Centre (London)	Greg Hands (Conservative) Chelsea and Fulham	By 2020	0
MOD Wethersfield (Essex)	James Cleverly (Conservative) Braintree	Transfer to HCA by 2020	4,850
Chetwynd Barracks (Chilwell, Nottinghamshire)	Anna Soubry (Conservative) Broxtowe	Not before 2020	800
Thornhill Barracks (Part of Clayton Barracks, Aldershot)	Sir Gerald Howarth (Conservative) Aldershot	Not before 2021	70

<i>Site</i>	<i>Constituency and MP</i>	<i>Proposed Release Date</i>	<i>Housing Unit Potential (Up to)</i>
MOD Cheadle Hulme (Greater Manchester)	George Osborne (Conservative) Tatton	Not before 2022	165

[HCWS659]

EDUCATION

Condition Improvement Fund

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Mr Sam Gyimah): Today I am announcing the outcome of the Condition Improvement Fund 2016-17, which provides funding for the improvement and expansion of existing academy and sixth-form college buildings.

I am announcing funding of £435 million for 1,276 projects across 1,030 academies and sixth-form colleges, which will help to ensure that children across the country have access to world class schools. Ensuring that there is a good local school place for every child, and that all children are being taught in safe and fit for purpose school buildings which help unlock their full potential, is of highest importance to this Government.

The Government announced at the spending review in November that they are investing £23 billion in schools infrastructure between 2016 and 2021. This money will support the opening of 500 free schools, the provision of over 600,000 additional school places, the rebuild and refurbishment of schools and will address essential school maintenance needs. In addition to the funding for expansion of good and outstanding academies and colleges that we are announcing today, we are also making over £200 million capital funding available to support the expansion of special education needs provision and the creation of new special schools. We will say more about how this will be distributed later this year.

We know that being taught in school buildings that are in poor condition can have an adverse effect on pupils and staff and that is why we are continuing to invest in improving our estate. Today's announcement follows on from the announcement in February of the allocation of £200 million of devolved formula capital to schools and the school condition allocations to local authorities, voluntary aided schools and larger multi-academy trusts.

Details of today's announcement are being sent to all applicants and a list of successful projects will be published on www.gov.uk. Copies will be placed in the Library of the House. We will look for opportunities to fund further high scoring applications from this year's bidding round should additional funding become available.

[HCWS649]

National Reference Test

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): Today, the Government are publishing their response to their public consultation¹ on the introduction of new secondary legislation to require selected schools to take part in the national reference test (NRT).

The NRT is a further step in the Government's reform agenda, which will deliver robust and rigorous qualifications for England's students. Before 2010, pupils received successively higher grades at GCSE each year, but in international league tables England's performance stagnated. Ofqual has halted this grade inflation through the use of comparable outcomes².

Ofqual is introducing the NRT which will indicate if GCSE results should change from year to year. Over time, this will provide an additional method of measuring real changes in national performance at GCSE which is distinct from the use of international comparisons such as the PISA study.

The National Reference Test

Each year, a different sample of 300 secondary schools, both in the state and independent sectors, will be selected to take part. Random samples of pupils from each selected school will take a test lasting about an hour. About 30 pupils from each school will take the English language test and another 30 will take the mathematics test. Ofqual will publish information about overall test performance each summer when GCSE results are announced. The results will not be used for school accountability purposes and results will not be given to individual pupils. Instead, the NRT will provide Ofqual with additional evidence on year-on-year changes in performance.

Participation in the test will benefit both schools and pupils, as it will help to provide more direct evidence of improving school performance at the national level which can be reflected in the grades that are awarded at GCSE, ensuring higher attaining cohorts are rewarded.

The legislation will apply to maintained schools. It will also apply to most academies and free schools through an existing provision in their funding agreements requiring them to comply with guidance issued by the Secretary of State in relation to assessments. It will not apply to independent schools although pupils at independent schools will also be asked to take the test to ensure that the sample of pupils that take the test is nationally representative.

The consultation

The public consultation, which ran from 30 November 2015 until 22 January 2016 allowed teachers, parents, pupils, and all those with an interest to provide their views, which have been taken into account in preparing the final legislation. Having carefully considered the small number of responses received, the Government have decided to proceed with enacting the proposed secondary legislation. It is important that the sample of pupils taking the test each year is fully representative and therefore it is appropriate that it should be mandatory for selected schools to take part. The legislation will come into force on 1 September 2016 and the first full NRT will take place in March 2017.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/national-reference-test-implementation-arrangements>

² For further information, see: <https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2015/08/05/gcse-marking-and-grading/>

[HCWS650]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council and General Affairs Council

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs attended the Foreign Affairs Council on 14 March and I attended the General Affairs Council on 15 March. The Foreign Affairs Council was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, and the General Affairs Council was chaired by the Dutch presidency. The meetings were held in Brussels.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COUNCIL

A provisional report of the meeting and Conclusions adopted can be found at:

<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2016/03/14>.

In her introductory remarks Ms Mogherini briefed Foreign Ministers on her recent visits to Cuba and Argentina, the EU role on the International Syria Support Group and on external aspects of the migration crisis.

Russia

The Council took stock of EU-Russia relations, in a discussion which took place shortly before the announcement of the partial withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria.

As part of the discussion, Ms Mogherini proposed five guiding principles for the EU's policy towards Russia:

- full implementation of the Minsk agreements as a key element for any substantial change;
- strengthening relations with eastern partners and other neighbours, including central Asia;
- strengthening the EU's resilience;
- selective engagement where there is a clear EU interest to engage; and
- strengthening people-to-people contacts and support to civil society.

Ministers supported the guiding principles. The Foreign Secretary argued for a united EU position. It was not in our interests to isolate Russia, but sanctions remained necessary and effective: and this was not the time to change tack. The Foreign Secretary added the EU should continue to hold Russia to account when it violated international norms.

Iran

The Council discussed relations with Iran and possible areas of re-engagement following the adoption of the joint comprehensive plan of action and the lifting of all nuclear-related EU sanctions. Ms Mogherini briefed Ministers on her planned trip to Tehran in April, where she will be accompanied by a delegation of commissioners, which will explore different areas of co-operation with Iran. The Foreign Secretary made clear that, while much progress has been made, we continued to have concerns (for example in relation to Iran's human rights record) and that it was important to pursue a careful and balanced approach to reengagement.

Libya

Over lunch, Foreign Ministers exchanged views with the United Nations Secretary General's special representative for Libya, Martin Kobler, on recent developments in Libya.

Middle East Peace Process

The Council discussed the latest developments in the region including an update from Ms Mogherini on plans by the middle east Quartet to prepare a report with recommendations for de-escalating the violence and promoting a two-state solution. The Council also discussed an initiative led by France to convene an international conference in Paris by the summer of 2016 with the aim relaunching the peace process in the middle east. Ms Mogherini and a number of member states supported the initiative.

Ministers agreed without discussion a number of measures:

The Council adopted conclusions on the Central African Republic.

The Council adopted conclusions on the European Court of Auditors' Special Report: 'ACP- EU Energy facility support for renewable energy in east Africa'.

The Council concluded consultation with Burundi under article 96 of the EU-ACP Partnership Agreement (Cotonou agreement).

The Council adopted a decision amending restrictive measure against members of the Al-Qaida organisation and other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with them.

The Council approved a crisis management concept (CMC) for a possible EU military training mission in the Central African Republic.

The Council adopted the updated version of the common military list of the EU, which acts as a reference point for member states' national military technology and equipment lists.

The Council took note of the 17th annual report, which defines common rules governing the control of exports of military technology and equipment.

GENERAL AFFAIRS COUNCIL

A provisional report of the meeting and conclusions adopted can be found at:

<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2016/03/14/>

The General Affairs Council (GAC) on 15 March focused on preparation of the March European Council, the inter-institutional agreement on better regulation, the European semester and the cohesion policy.

Preparation of the March European Council

The GAC discussed the agenda for the European Council on 17 to 18 March, which the Prime Minister attended. The agenda covered migration and European semester and outcomes of the February European Council.

On migration, I welcomed the outcomes of the EU-Turkey summit and emphasised that more work needed to be done before leaders could reach agreement at the March European Council. I highlighted the need for a more strategic approach to stop people smuggling and dissuade migrants from using the Aegean route.

Inter-Institutional Agreement on Better Regulation (IIA)

The Council formally adopted the IIA text and will focus on implementation at the May GAC and June European Council. The agreement now needs to be

officially signed by the Commission, Parliament and Council and shall enter into force on the day of its signature.

European semester

The Council welcomed the synthesis report which summarises the results of this year's European semester process. The presidency led an exchange of views on the importance of good governance for driving the successful implementation of the semester's recommendations.

Cohesion policy—Investing in Jobs and Growth

Commissioner Cretu presented the Commission report "Investing in jobs and growth—maximising the contribution of European Structural and Investment Funds" which summarised the expected results over the 2014-20 period. She called for a debate on simplification, which would feed into the mid-term review of the multi-annual financial framework and the larger debate on the future of cohesion policy.

Under AOB, the presidency informed the Council that the informal GAC, 11 to 12 April, would focus on coherence of the Council's work and how it fits with follow-up to the European Council as well as follow-up to the multi-annual financial framework seminar held in February.

The next formal GAC will take place on 24 May, and will focus on follow-up to the March European Council, preparation for the June European Council, rule of law, and better regulation.

[HCWS655]

National Counter-proliferation Strategy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is today publishing a public version of the national counter-proliferation strategy to 2020.

Following the publication of the National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security review 2015 the 2012-2015 national counter-proliferation strategy has been updated to guide the UK's counter-proliferation activity until 2020.

The overall aim of the national counter proliferation strategy to 2020 is to prevent the spread or further development of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear capability or advanced military technology which could threaten UK interests or regional stability. The revised strategy broadly follows the same lines of action as over the previous five years, but has been restructured and updated to take account of new developments. It focuses UK action around three strands:

influencing the intent of others, as the most effective way of controlling capabilities;

controlling access globally to the materials and knowledge that would allow a hostile state or terrorist group to act on that intent; and

identifying and disrupting illicit attempts to circumvent these controls.

The UK will work closely with allies, deploying our diplomatic, intelligence, law enforcement and scientific expertise to tackle these challenges.

The delivery of the counter-proliferation strategy is a cross-Government effort led by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and overseen by the National Security Council.

The strategy will be published on the www.gov.uk website.
[HCWS654]

HEALTH

Food Standards Agency: Triennial Review of Six Scientific Advisory Committees

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): On 10 September 2015, I announced the commencement of the triennial review by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) for the six scientific advisory committees (SACs) for which the FSA is the sole or lead sponsor (HCSW183).

The six committees are: the Advisory Committee on Animal Feedstuffs (ACAF); the Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food (ACMSF); the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes (ACNFP); the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT); the General Advisory Committee on Science (GACS); and the Social Science Research Committee (SSRC).

The FSA reviewed all six bodies as a cluster, which provided a more efficient review process, and allowed the review to consider any gaps or overlaps in the committees' functions and opportunities for efficiencies in their operation.

The FSA consulted widely with relevant stakeholders, including Government departments and agencies, the devolved Administrations and others with an interest in the work of the committees. The FSA also completed an open call for evidence so that all those with an interest could contribute. I am grateful to all those who contributed to the review.

I am now pleased to announce the completion of the review and publication of the final report.

The review made eight recommendations which, in summary, concluded that:

The functions performed by the ACMSF and COT are still required and they should be retained as advisory non-departmental public bodies;

The advisory risk assessment functions of the ACNFP and the ACAF should be replaced with a new committee which would retain any future functions required from these two committees within the framework of a wider remit on innovation in the food chain;

The FSA should follow similar models in other Government Departments with external chief scientific advisers and replace the GACS (established in 2007 to provide independent advice and challenge to FSA's then internal chief scientist) with a Science Council;

The SSRC should review its future work programme and membership to provide strategic support, scientific advice and challenge which will inform the FSA in delivery of its strategic objectives and help it understand its impact, reflecting the priorities in the new FSA strategic plan;

The three FSA committees, the SSRC, the new Committee on Innovation in the Food Chain and the new FSA Science Council, should continue to operate openly and transparently as expert committees for the FSA; and

A number of areas of good practice were also identified by the review, and a further four recommendations are made

about how to improve the efficiency and impact of the SACs work and to ensure they continue to meet the highest standards of governance.

The FSA will now discuss and determine how the recommendations can be implemented. The final report of the review is available online.

Attachments can be viewed online at:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-03-24/HCWS651/>.

[HCWS651]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Tier 2 Workers

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): I am today announcing reforms to Tier 2, the migration route for those undertaking skilled work in the UK, in response to the Migration Advisory Committee's review of Tier 2, and its separate review of whether nurses should remain on the shortage occupation list.

For too long we have had a shortage of workers in certain roles, and in the past, it has been too easy for employers to recruit overseas. Last May, the Prime Minister set out our ambition to reform our immigration and labour market rules, and to reduce the demand for skilled migrant labour. The Government subsequently commissioned the independent MAC to advise on reducing economic migration from outside Europe. The MAC was asked to look at restricting skilled work visas to genuine skills shortages and highly specialist experts, raising Tier 2 salary thresholds to stop businesses using foreign workers to undercut wages, and a new immigration skills charge to invest in funding for training resident workers.

The MAC published their report on 19 January. It sets out a balanced series of proposals that aim to strike a balance between reducing reliance on non-EEA skilled workers while also supporting growth and productivity. The Government intend to accept the majority of the MAC's recommendations.

We will increase the Tier 2 minimum salary threshold to £30,000 for experienced workers. This change will be phased in, with the minimum threshold increased to £25,000 in autumn 2016 and to £30,000 in April 2017. The minimum threshold for new entrants will remain at £20,800.

Reflecting ongoing public sector pay restraint and specific recruitment challenges in these occupations, we shall exempt nurses, medical radiographers, paramedics and secondary school teachers in mathematics, physics, chemistry, computer science and Mandarin from the new salary threshold. Where the occupation is not on the shortage occupation list, we shall also give extra weighting to these occupations in the monthly allocation of the Tier 2 (General) limit. Both measures will apply until July 2019. In line with the MAC's recommendations, nurses will remain on the shortage occupation list, but employers will need to carry out a resident labour market test before recruiting a non-EEA nurse.

Employers will continue to be able to recruit non-EEA graduates of UK universities without first testing the resident labour market and without being subject to the annual limit on Tier 2 (General) places, which will remain at 20,700 places per year. Additionally, we shall give

extra weighting within the Tier 2 (General) limit to businesses sponsoring overseas graduates, and will allow graduates to switch roles within a company once they have secured a permanent job at the end of their training programme. These changes will take effect from autumn 2016.

From April 2017, there will be extra weighting within the Tier 2 (General) limit where the allocation of places is associated with the relocation of a high-value business to the UK or, potentially, supports an inward investment. We will also waive the resident labour market test for these applications.

We will simplify and streamline the Tier 2 (Intra-Company Transfer) provisions in line with our international trade obligations to provide a route for senior managers and specialists. All intra-company transferees will be required to qualify under a single visa category with a minimum salary threshold of £41,500. The exception will be the Graduate Trainee category, where we shall reduce the current salary threshold from £24,800 to £23,000, and increase the number of trainees that an employer may bring to the UK from five to 20.

There will be a transitional period until April 2017 to allow those affected to plan for the changes. In autumn 2016, we will close the Skills Transfer category to new applications and increase the minimum salary threshold for the Short Term category to £30,000. From April 2017, we will close the Short Term category to new applications.

From autumn 2016, all intra-company transferees will be required to pay the immigration health surcharge. We will review the extent to which allowances may be counted as salary to ensure we have appropriate safeguards in place against undercutting of the resident labour market and consider how to take forward the MAC's proposal for a review of skills in the IT sector.

To provide some further flexibility within the streamlined intra-company transfer category, we shall lower the minimum salary threshold for intra-company transferees working in the UK for between five and nine years from £155,300 to £120,000. We will also remove the one year experience requirement for all applications where the worker is paid over £73,900. These changes will take effect from April 2017.

There will be no change to the work rights of dependants of Tier 2 migrants.

The MAC strongly supported the introduction of the immigration skills charge to incentivise employers to reduce their reliance on migrant workers and to invest in training and up-skilling UK workers. The charge will be levied on Tier 2 employers at a rate of £1,000 per certificate of sponsorship per year. A reduced rate of £364 will apply to small and charitable sponsors, as defined by Immigration and Nationality (Fees) Regulations. PhD level occupations, the Intra Company Transfer Graduate Trainee category, and those switching from a Tier 4 student visa to a Tier 2 visa will be exempt.

The Government intend to have completed implementation of these measures by April 2017. As part of the implementation process, we also intend to simplify the immigration rules and guidance for skilled workers coming to the United Kingdom, to make the system clearer and more user-friendly for employers and applicants.

[HCWS660]

PRIME MINISTER**Machinery of Government Change: Environmental
Regulatory Functions**

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): This written statement confirms that responsibility for environmental regulatory functions will transfer from the Department

for Business, Innovation and Skills to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. This change will be effective from 1 April 2016.

[HCWS658]

Petition

Thursday 24 March 2016

OBSERVATIONS

EDUCATION

Newark Free School

The petition of residents of Newark,

Declares that the Torch Academy Group's application for a free school in Newark should be accepted; notes that almost 50% of all secondary school pupils, resident in Newark, are currently being educated at schools outside of the town; further that many parents choose to educate their children at schools outside of the town because they are not satisfied by the academic standards routinely achieved by existing secondary schools in the town; further that over 400 children from Newark are currently being educated at Toot Hill school, Bingham, an outstanding Academy run by the Torch Academy Group; believes that the application provides a once in a generation opportunity to establish a benchmark outstanding secondary school in Newark which all parents of the town can have the confidence to send their children to; further notes that in excess of 200 children have already been registered as prospective pupils for Newark Free School; and acknowledges the outstanding leadership of Mr John Tomasevic, Chief Executive Officer of the Torch Academy Group which is leading the application.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to approve the application for the Newark Free School as soon as possible.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Robert Jenrick, *Official Report*, 10 March 2016; Vol. 607, c. 532.]

[P001678]

Observations from The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb):

The application for Newark Toot Hill Free School has been received and will be assessed against the published criteria along with all others received in free school application wave 11. The assessment criteria cover the education and financial plans for the school, the need for the school and the capacity and capability of the proposers.

Free schools are responsive to local demand for new schools. The Department assesses the need for a free school by taking into account the number of places available in existing local schools, the performance of these schools, and the local authority's projections for the number of school places needed in future years. The assessment also takes into account how the proposed school will enhance parental choice in the area and how well the proposers have engaged with a cross-section of their local community.

The Department acknowledges the support of the residents of Newark and will take this into account as part of the assessment of the Newark Toot Hill Free School. The outcome of the proposal will be announced as part of the wave 11 announcements.

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