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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 9 June 2016**

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 9 June 2016*

*The House met at half-past Nine o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

*The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport was asked—*

#### First World War Commemoration

1. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure the greatest possible engagement by children and young people in the commemoration of the first world war. [905288]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett)**: All our first world war programmes, including the school battlefield tours, the great war debate series and the 14-18 NOW culture programme, are designed to engage children and young people. Only last week, young people played a prominent role in our commemorations to mark the Battle of Jutland. I was delighted to be in Orkney and I commend the young people who participated. On 30 June and 1 July, we will commemorate the centenary of the Battle of the Somme, when young people will again play a key role at national events taking place at Westminster Abbey, in Manchester and at the Thiepval memorial in France.

**Stephen Metcalfe**: My “Forget Never” project, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, is already getting young people from across Basildon thinking about the important events of 100 years ago. Will my right hon. Friend therefore join me in encouraging more young people to get involved in commemorating the Somme by calling on all remaining schools in Basildon to sign up to this project so that their students might also benefit from its opportunities?

**Mr Evennett**: I endorse my hon. Friend’s comments and am delighted to hear of the fantastic work being done in his constituency. I endorse all efforts to encourage young people to engage with the programme and to discover history. Young people can also get involved in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission’s “Living Memory” project in their local area and find out about

events near them run by schools and not-for-profit organisations that are part of the Imperial War Museum’s centenary partnership.

**Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It is important that young people engage with the commemorations, but it is also important that we in the House do so too. Does the Minister share my concern that, just a few weeks ahead of the centenary of the Battle of the Somme, we do not have a planned moment to debate the matter in the House? My concern is shared widely across the House. If he agrees, will he use his good offices to raise the issue with the Leader of the House so that Members might have that moment here to reflect on this important moment in our history?

**Mr Evennett**: I totally endorse the hon. Gentleman’s comments. I will have a word with the Leader of the House and you, Mr Speaker, as the responsible authorities, but I would certainly back such a debate.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that when the first world war is commemorated, too much emphasis is not placed on the set-piece battles. On average, every day during the first world war, 450 servicemen lost their lives, which is equivalent to all the losses in Afghanistan. It was not just a few set battles; it was every day for four years.

**Mr Evennett**: My hon. Friend makes a good point. There is funding for communities to explore local first world war history, through the Heritage Lottery Fund, as well as through the War Memorials Trust for the repair and conservation of local war memorials. Local communities should be commemorating every aspect of their local communities to highlight what happened and remember those who served and gave their lives.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I thank the Minister for acknowledging the contribution of the young people of Orkney to the Battle of Jutland commemorations last week, at which he was present. Is not the lesson that involving young people makes it meaningful and poignant for those of all ages and that, if we want to engage young people, we should involve them, not lecture them?

**Mr Evennett**: I was delighted to be in the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency to experience the moving ceremonies for the Jutland centenary commemorations. It is vital that we engage everybody, particularly young people, so that they might learn about what happened.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I welcome the Department’s work to engage young people so that they might understand the suffering and sacrifice. What steps is it taking, however, to make young people understand the wider implications of world war one, such as the Balfour agreement and the redrawing of boundaries in the middle east, and how, in Europe, it sowed the seeds for world war two?

**Mr Evennett**: It is important that we get across the whole of this, and what the hon. Gentleman says is very important. At the moment, we are determined to focus on the particular events being commemorated, but more

widely we also want to make people, particularly young people, aware of our 20th century history, of people's experiences and of the tragedy of war.

**Danny Kinahan** (South Antrim) (UUP): Will the Minister congratulate everyone who was involved in the first world war, including those from the rest of the world, particularly Ireland—for us in Northern Ireland—but also the Indians, the Africans and all those who were part of it, so that children might learn that it included most areas of the world and that an awful price was paid by many?

**Mr Evennett:** Indeed. It is very important, for the empire and the Commonwealth, to recognise the contributions of all parts of the communities in the four nations of our country and particularly people from Commonwealth countries such as the Indians, the Canadians, the Australians and the rest. This lies at the heart of what we are trying to do, as we commemorate all those who participated in the Somme.

### Leveson Inquiry

2. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): When part two of the Leveson inquiry will commence; and if he will make a statement. [905290]

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale):** Criminal proceedings connected to the subject matter of the Leveson inquiry, including the appeals process, have not yet completed. We have always been clear that these cases must conclude before we consider part 2 of the inquiry.

**Christian Matheson:** Let me pin down the Secretary of State. Are we saying that when criminal proceedings have finished, there will be a part 2 or there might be? He told us on 3 March that a decision

“about whether or not Leveson 2 should take place”—[*Official Report*, 3 March 2016; Vol. 606, c. 1097.]

will be taken afterwards. Is it when or whether?

**Mr Whittingdale:** This will need to be considered in detail once those cases have been concluded. There are still areas that were not fully explored in the original inquiry. There have obviously been events since the original inquiry, not least the proceedings in the courts. All these matters will need to be taken into account when we consider how best to proceed after the conclusion of those cases.

**Keith Vaz** (Leicester East) (Lab): The Secretary of State was one of three Chairs of Select Committees, along with myself and the now Lord Alan Beith, who went to see the Prime Minister and we were given a cast-iron guarantee that there would be a part 2. I accept what the right hon. Gentleman says about criminal proceedings, which is exactly what the Home Secretary said on 16 December, but there is no reason why we should not have a timetable to prepare for the eventuality. These cases cannot go on for ever—even in our criminal justice system. There has to be an end. May we not have a timetable and perhaps the selection of a head of the inquiry so that we can begin that very important process?

**Mr Whittingdale:** I am delighted to hear that the Home Secretary and I are singing from the same hymn sheet on this matter. I have talked to her about it, but

that was at a time when it looked as if the cases were going to come to a conclusion in the reasonably near future. Fortunately, or unfortunately, new cases have been brought, and one or two of them have not even started yet, which makes it very difficult to put a timetable on developments. I obviously agree with right hon. Gentleman that these cases cannot go on indefinitely, but they are already going on rather longer than was initially anticipated.

### Tourism

3. **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support the tourism sector. [905291]

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale):** The Prime Minister's five-point plan for tourism sets out how this Government will help to grow the British tourism industry. The year 2015 set new records for inbound visits and spend, but we are not complacent. To boost tourism in England further, the Chancellor announced a new £40 million Discover England fund at the last spending round. This will support visitors to discover even more of England's hidden gems.

**Cat Smith:** The Secretary of State may be aware of the many great tourist attractions in north Lancashire along the Fylde coast, including the historic Lancaster castle with stunning views over Morecambe bay and the area of outstanding natural beauty, the forest of Bowland? Does the right hon. Gentleman feel that the tens of thousands of jobs that are supported by tourism in my area are helped or hindered by the potential threat of fracking wells appearing in north Lancashire?

**Mr Whittingdale:** I very much share the hon. Lady's appreciation of the beauties of the Fylde coast and the north-west. Fracking offers terrific opportunities for accessing further low-cost energy, and I do not believe that it should represent any threat to the tourism industry.

I would like to take advantage of this moment at the Dispatch Box to pay tribute to the fantastic work of the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr Evennett), who is responsible for tourism. He has done a great job. We look forward shortly to welcoming back to her role the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), but my right hon. Friend has done a fantastic job in her absence. I have no doubt that he will continue to advocate sports, tourism and heritage in the extremely effective way that he has over the last few months.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Our coastal communities are particularly important to the tourism sector, but they are also the communities that have been particularly badly affected by our membership of the EU over the last 40 years. Can the Secretary of State give an assurance that the initiatives he mentioned will be directed particularly at coastal communities?

**Mr Whittingdale:** I share many of my hon. Friend's views on our membership of the European Union, although I have to say that I do not think EU membership has a great bearing on tourism. People come to this

country because of our fantastic heritage, our wonderful landscape, our arts and our sport, not because we are members of the European Union.

The north-west does have many attractions, and I hope it will take advantage of the Discover England fund, which I described earlier. The fund is designed to raise awareness of the many attractions that England has outside London, and, as has been pointed out by my hon. Friend and by the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), many of those are indeed in the north-west.

**Mr Nigel Dodds** (Belfast North) (DUP): Has the Secretary of State had any recent discussions with the Northern Ireland Executive about Tourism Ireland, that strange body which is responsible for marketing the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland overseas? There is concern in Northern Ireland about the possibility that its identity will be lost and it will be unable to benefit from the inflow of tourists visiting the rest of the United Kingdom, although it currently has a tremendous amount to offer them.

**Mr Whittingdale**: I am aware of the slightly different arrangements for the promotion of tourism in Northern Ireland, although I have had no discussions with the Minister responsible for it. I think he has only just arrived. I look forward to meeting him in due course, and I shall be happy to talk to him about the issue then.

**Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I join the Secretary of State in applauding last year's success, when a record number of people—36.1 million—visited the United Kingdom. As he will know, 67% of those visitors were from the European Union and 74% were from other European countries. Will he join me in saying, "Thank you, Europe—thank you, our European colleagues—and please come more and spend more"?

**Mr Whittingdale**: I am extremely happy to join my hon. Friend in saying that. My view is that this country would prosper better outside the European Union, but that is in no way reflected in my attitude to our fellow citizens in Europe coming to visit us in the UK. I hope that they will continue to do so in ever-increasing numbers, whether or not we are in the European Union.

4. **Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What steps his Department plans to take to increase the level of tourism in England from (a) domestic and (b) foreign visitors. [905292]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett)**: We now have the full domestic and inbound figures for 2015. As we have just heard from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, there is good news on both fronts, but there is particularly good news about domestic tourism. The number of overnight trips in England reached 102.7 million, up 11% on 2014, and spending reached a new record of £19.6 billion, up 8%. However, there is more to be done, and we are determined to increase the number of both domestic and foreign visitors in the coming year.

**Pauline Latham**: What support can the Minister give the Derwent valley cycleway scheme, which allows visitors to cycle from Derby silk mill in the city centre through the Arkwright mills world heritage site at Belper, and on

to Cromford and beyond? The scheme not only provides safer cycling for people of all ages, but encourages much-needed local and international tourism in the area.

**Mr Evennett**: I give my full support to the Derwent valley cycleway. This is an excellent scheme that safely opens up the beautiful Derwent valley, a world heritage site, so that more people can see it. Cycling has many health and environmental benefits, and the increased number of local and international visitors using the cycleway will benefit tourism in the region even further.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister—for whom I have great respect—use his common sense, ground his boss and bring him to Yorkshire, so that he can talk to real people in the tourism business who are dreadfully worried about the impact of our leaving the European Union on jobs, investment and so much else? Yorkshire is a prime tourism destination, and we do not want to harm that.

**Mr Evennett**: Yorkshire is indeed a prime destination for tourism, and it has so much to offer. I have been going around the country—I am off to Devon and Dorset today and tomorrow—to promote tourism and heritage again, and I will do all that I can to persuade domestic and foreign visitors to come to Yorkshire and the rest of our great nation.

**Mr Speaker**: I am sure that the people of Devon and Dorset will soon realise how lucky they are.

### Rugby Union

5. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): What plans his Department has to promote the community benefits of rugby union. [905293]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett)**: Sports such as rugby union bring tremendous benefits to the individuals and communities who engage in them. Between 2013 and 2017, Sport England is investing £20 million to get more people playing rugby.

**Kevin Foster**: We certainly know how lucky we are in Devon.

There are 47 rugby union clubs across Devon, and they provide people of all ages and backgrounds access to the game and a chance to get more involved in their community. What further support can the Government give those clubs and Devon Rugby Football Union to enhance further their role of getting more people involved in the game and their community?

**Mr Evennett**: I take this opportunity to congratulate Devon RFU on the work that it has been doing to provide so many opportunities for people to get involved in the great game of rugby. Across Devon, Sport England has invested £319,632 to upgrade, improve and repair nine grassroots rugby clubs since 2010. As I have said—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) should listen. We listened to her yesterday when she was waffling on about the BBC, so she should listen today to get some facts. We are focused on getting more people from all backgrounds involved in sport and physical activity.

**John Nicolson** (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Talking about the BBC, rugby union is only one of many sports covered by the corporation with its editorial independence. Has the Minister taken time to reflect on yesterday's BBC debate, reviewed today's press coverage and realised that Government interference in editorial issues such as the proposed "Scottish Six" is deeply unwelcome?

**Mr Evennett:** I was here listening to the debate yesterday, and I commend the excellent speeches of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): With the support and the help of the Minister's Department, we had the first ever mixed ability rugby world cup in my constituency last year. Will my hon. Friend's Department continue to help and support mixed ability rugby, and will he use his good offices to extend the mixed ability format, which has been so successfully run in my constituency, to other sports as well?

**Mr Evennett:** I have noted what my hon. Friend has said, and I know what a champion he is for his area and his constituency. We very much believe in inclusion and getting as many people involved as we possibly can. I will look at what he has to say and reflect on it.

**Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Has the Minister had a chance to look at the success of schemes such as Rugby Get Onside, which is run by Saracens Rugby Club with young offenders at Feltham? Rugby has a great role in rehabilitating young offenders. Will he discuss that with the Justice Secretary and consider the role that rugby can play as part of his Department's reforms of prisons?

**Mr Evennett:** My hon. Friend makes an interesting point, and I will certainly do that. Rugby is a fantastic game that brings together all sorts of different people from different backgrounds and has great opportunities for community.

### Broadband

6. **Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to accelerate the roll-out of broadband in (a) rural and (b) urban areas. [905294]

**The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey):** I am very pleased to tell you once again, Mr Speaker, how well the rural broadband programme is going. We have reached our target of 90%, with 4 million homes passed, and we will reach our target of 95% by the end of 2017.

**Huw Merriman:** My constituents in the parishes of Dallington, Brightling, Mountfield, Ashburton and Penshurst will welcome the Government's new legal right to fast broadband. May I ask the Minister whether the reasonable cost test will be benchmarked against, first, the realistic cost to install in rural areas that are not currently connected to fast broadband and, secondly, the cheapest cost that any provider would charge rather than the cost that BT Openreach may calculate?

**Mr Vaizey:** We will certainly consult on the reasonable cost test, and it may well be that a number of providers do provide the universal service obligation, which will potentially provide welcome competition. That will be open for consultation once we have passed legislation, which I know will have the support of the whole House.

**Sue Hayman** (Workington) (Lab): Earlier this week, I received an email from the Minister, which helpfully informed me that 3,198 premises in my constituency—that is 8% or nearly one in 12—are not currently planned to be connected to superfast broadband. What has the Minister got to say to the sizeable number of my constituents who face the prospect of never being able to access an adequate broadband connection?

**Mr Vaizey:** I would say to her constituents that we said that we would get to 90% by the end of last year, which we achieved, and that we would get to 95% by the end of 2017, so we have been completely transparent about what we are planning to do. We are now consulting on a USO precisely to help those constituents of the hon. Lady who are not in the rural broadband programme. We are bringing in important changes to planning in the digital economy Bill, which I hope will have the support of the Opposition Front Bench team. She should congratulate the Government because the way the contracts have been constructed means that almost £300 million is coming back, so we are going to go further than 95% and reach more of her constituents. She should be telling them that rather than complaining.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): Residents in Denford are extremely frustrated at the lack of progress in securing superfast broadband. Will the Minister encourage Superfast Northamptonshire and BT to redouble their efforts to get Denford connected?

**Mr Vaizey:** I will certainly do that.

**Albert Owen** (Ynys Môn) (Lab): What discussions are the Minister and his officials having with Welsh Government Ministers and officials about the universal service obligation to ensure that we can have joined-up thinking when the Bills, which I support, come through? To cement this relationship between the Welsh Government and the UK Government, may I repeat my offer of Ynys Môn as the location for a pilot scheme?

**Mr Vaizey:** I would happily work with the hon. Gentleman and the Welsh Government. I have always found him and the Welsh Government to be congenial colleagues in regard to the roll-out of superfast broadband.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): We know that the Secretary of State wants to leave the European Union, but his Minister appears already to have left the United Kingdom to inhabit some fantasy "Broadbandia" in which everything is, in his words, an "unadulterated success". For the rest of us in the 21st century United Kingdom, however, the reality is different. One in five broadband users still has less than half the speed that Ofcom classes as acceptable, and 70% of smartphone users in rural areas have zero access to 4G. Rather than living in "Broadbandia", the rest of

us are living in “Broadbadia“. Will the Minister stop fantasising and acknowledge the view of the Countryside Alliance:

“This rural broadband betrayal is devastating”?

**Mr Vaizey:** I know that the hon. Lady will want to join me in commemorating this important day, which is the 33rd anniversary of Margaret Thatcher’s landslide election victory in 1983. In that year, there was no broadband and the Minister you see before you was sitting his O-levels. The Secretary of State, however, was on the great lady’s battle bus.

The hon. Lady might quote the Countryside Alliance, but the gardener Robin Lane Fox wrote an article in the *Financial Times*, which I know she reads, in which he talked about a move to the rural arcadia brought about by our broadband roll-out programme. He said that, like Falstaff, he was looking forward to dying babbling of green fields because he could live in the countryside with a superfast connection. Let us remind ourselves that Labour had a pathetic megabit policy, and that is still its policy. Let us also remind ourselves that we are two years ahead of where Labour would have been, and let us talk up the success of this programme instead of constantly talking down great broadband Britain.

**Mr Speaker:** I am sure that the hon. Gentleman’s performance is greatly enjoyed, not least by the hon. Gentleman.

#### EU Digital Single Market

7. **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential benefits for the UK digital economy of completing the EU digital single market. [905296]

**The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey):** As I was saying, we have a great broadband Britain in a great European Union. Britain sits at the centre of the digital single market, which, if it is implemented, will increase GDP for Europe by 3%, or some £300 billion.

**Stephen Timms:** This time, I think the Minister is on to something. The UK is Europe’s leading digital economy, and we have the most to gain from the digital single market. That is why 70% of techUK members and 96% of the members of the Creative Industries Federation want us to remain in the European Union. Will the Minister have a go at persuading his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State how damaging it would be for digital jobs in the UK if we left the EU?

**Mr Vaizey:** My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has a mind of his own, and he quite rightly often takes the view that it is not worth listening to me, which is probably why he is such a successful Secretary of State. I do wish he would listen to me on this issue, however, because tech and digital companies do benefit from our membership of the European Union and they will continue to thrive if we stay in the EU.

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the internet has been a huge source of economic growth in this country and that the last thing it needs is to be stifled by the Brussels bureaucrats, which is exactly what will happen under the proposals in the EU’s single digital market strategy?

**Mr Vaizey:** That intervention reminds me that this is the 41st anniversary of the first radio transmission from the House of Commons, and quality interventions such as that keep the British public listening to and watching our proceedings. However, I do not think that the Brussels bureaucracy is stifling. In fact, 500 broadcast companies are based in Britain precisely because of European regulations.

#### Conflict Zones: Cultural Heritage

8. **John Howell** (Henley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the protection of cultural heritage in conflict zones overseas. [905297]

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale):** The protection of cultural heritage affected by acts of destruction is a priority for this Government. The Government are providing £30 million for a new cultural protection fund, and the Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill, which will enable the UK to ratify the 1954 Hague convention and accede to its two protocols, had its Second Reading in the House of Lords earlier this week.

**John Howell:** As one of the few archaeologists in this House, I feel that we as a country need to take a lead in protecting cultural heritage. Will the cultural protection fund and the Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill do that?

**Mr Whittingdale:** We certainly benefit from my hon. Friend’s expertise in this area. He is absolutely right: this country has long been a strong advocate of cultural protection, but the perception of our commitment has perhaps been undermined by our failure until now to ratify the 1954 Hague convention. I am delighted that we will be doing so through the Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill, reinforcing our position as one of the leading voices in advocating the importance of cultural protection around the world.

#### Domestic Tourism

9. **Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): What assessment he has made of recent trends in (a) the level of and (b) regional variations in the level of domestic tourism. [905298]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett):** As I have already said, there is good news on domestic tourism. The number of overnight trips in England in 2015 was up by 11%. Five regions—the east midlands, the west midlands, the south-west, Yorkshire and the Humber, and London—saw double-digit growth in domestic overnight trips on the previous year. Last year, there was positive growth in tourism in the east of England, including in both inbound and domestic visits and stays.

**Will Quince:** As you know, Mr Speaker, Colchester is the oldest recorded town in Britain and our first capital city. We have Roman walls, Britain’s only discovered Roman circus, and the largest Norman keep in Europe. May I invite the Minister to visit Colchester to see the amazing tourism potential that our town has to offer?

**Mr Evennett:** I commend my hon. Friend for being a champion for his city of Colchester. It is a place of huge cultural significance and history, and I encourage tourists to discover what is on offer there. I thank him for his invitation, which sounds like a fantastic opportunity, and my office will see what my diary permits regarding future visits.

**Mr Speaker:** Colchester also has a very good university.

**Rob Marris** (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): As someone who spent several years as a bus driver, I know that one factor that encourages tourism is integrated ticketing on public transport. Will the Minister have a word with the Secretary of State for Transport about amending the Bus Services Bill to allow more integrated services and to enable councils to run bus services?

**Mr Evennett:** As the hon. Gentleman knows, that is not in my remit and is not for me to comment on. I can say, however, that the Chancellor has been rather generous with his spending on transport in this Parliament—50% higher than in previous years. We want to ensure that visitors have the confidence to explore Britain using public transport.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will know, we only have a new cathedral in Lichfield: the original, built in 650, burned down, so our current cathedral was built quite recently, in 1280. What can we do to encourage people to visit places such as Lichfield, which, beautiful though they are, are regarded by bus and coach companies as slightly off the beaten track?

**Mr Evennett:** My hon. Friend has been a tremendous champion for his constituency over many years. Thanks to the Chancellor, we have the £40 million Discover England fund to incentivise the development of world-class itineraries. I hope that my hon. Friend's area and others like it will be looking to make applications to see that we get tourists to their parts of the world.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response so far. We have an increasing number of tourists visiting Northern Ireland, not just because Liam Neeson is voicing the tourism adverts or because we have the Titanic, the SS Nomadic and the Giant's Causeway, but because more people are holidaying at home. What can the Minister do to ensure that all the regions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland work together so that we can all take advantage of the tourism attractions in each of them?

**Mr Evennett:** I know the fantastic opportunities that there are for tourist visitors to go to Northern Ireland and see what is on offer. We are trying to encourage people to have holidays at home—staycations—but we are also working with the devolved authorities to try to promote tourism, along with VisitEngland, Discover Northern Ireland, VisitScotland, Visit Wales and VisitBritain, so that we have a joined-up approach that shows the fantastic offer we have in our four countries of the United Kingdom.

## Football: Television Rights

11. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): If he will take steps to ensure that football supporters from all nations of the UK have non-paying access to watch their national team play on TV. [905302]

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport** (**Mr John Whittingdale**): The Ofcom code on listed events ensures that key sporting events are made available for free-to-air channels. Our sport strategy, published last year, made it clear that the Government do not propose to review that list.

**Gavin Newlands:** Like every other football fan on these islands, Scottish fans are looking forward to Euro 2016. We have our wallcharts at the ready and will be watching keenly. During qualification, however, we were unable to watch significant matches, including those against the world champions, Germany, on free-to-air channels. This month, we will be able to watch matches such as Romania versus Albania and Iceland versus Austria. How can those fixtures be regarded as of national interest when those of our national teams are not?

**Mr Whittingdale:** Scottish football fans will have the choice of the three home nations that have qualified in the championships to support, and I am sorry that on this occasion Scotland did not make it through. However, the question of which matches are shown by which broadcaster is essentially one for the sporting authorities. The limited list applies only to a very restricted number of sporting events, but beyond that it is for each sporting body to decide how best to strike the balance between maximising revenue for their sport and reaching as large an audience as possible.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): I am sure that the whole House will want to wish the teams of England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland all the best in the European championships. Football shows us that we have more in common with our European neighbours than divides us, as I am sure the Secretary of State will agree. That was demonstrated by the singing of the Marseillaise at Wembley in defiant response to the attacks in Paris. In that spirit, will he join me in urging fans to enjoy the tournament peacefully, whether they are travelling to France or watching in the company of their friends at home or in public places, and to assist the police and security services in trying to ensure that we have a safe and secure tournament?

**Mr Whittingdale:** I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman and I am grateful to him for putting the case as he has done and giving me the opportunity to endorse everything that he says. We look forward to the matches in the championships to come and we wish all the home nations success. I have a second interest in that I drew England in the departmental sweepstake and will be supporting England in their match against Russia, which, sadly, was drawn by the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), so she will have torn loyalties. We hope nevertheless that that match and every other match pass peaceably and to the maximum enjoyment of those participating and watching.



### Topical Questions

T1. [905308] **Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale)**: Since the last DCMS oral questions, Andy Murray has reached the final of the French Open and boxing has lost its most famous and greatest exponent, Muhammad Ali. The South Bank Sky Arts awards in June honoured British talent, including the Minister for Culture's favourite rapper, Stormzy, and I am sure that the whole House will be looking forward to the Euro championships, which begin in France on Friday, and will join me once again in wishing success to all the home nations taking part.

**Will Quince**: Colchester Borough Council, Essex County Council and Arts Council England are all contributing to the Mercury theatre's £8.8 million expansion plans. Does my right hon. Friend agree that investment in the arts is an investment in our local economy and that we should all get behind these exciting and impressive plans?

**Mr Whittingdale**: I certainly do join my hon. Friend in that. I think he was 10 at the time, but he might recall that I represented part of Colchester in the House of Commons, so I am very familiar with the Mercury theatre. I am delighted to hear about the investment in its expansion. I think that any investment in the arts brings real benefits, not least in economic terms, for the local community. I wish the Mercury continuing success into the future.

**Maria Eagle** (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): On Tuesday, the Secretary of State told the Culture, Media and Sport Committee in his evidence that there had been no discussions within government about Channel 4 privatisation, and that the examination of such an option had not been started by 9 September 2015, when he had previously answered questions before the Committee. However, in answer to an FOI request on 27 April, received in my office, the Department confirmed that he himself met the Minister for the Cabinet Office to discuss Channel 4 reform options on 3 September—six days before his appearance in front of that Committee. Can he explain the discrepancy?

**Mr Whittingdale**: Yes. The first discussion that I had with the Cabinet Office Minister was about Channel 4 and what possible options there would be for its future. At that stage, no decisions had been taken. Following that, the Department did begin to look at whether or not there was a case for having a fundamental examination, and the decision to go ahead with that was actually taken after my appearance before the Select Committee; it was taken later in the month of September.

**Maria Eagle**: Well, on Tuesday, in answer to questions from the Select Committee, the Secretary of State was asked whether or not any discussions at all had taken place before 9 September, and he replied—I have the transcript—“No not within government.” That seems to me a clear discrepancy, and it seems to me he may have misled the Committee, and I invite him to correct

his evidence to it now on this very important matter, which matters to a lot of us in this House—the future of Channel 4.

**Mr Whittingdale**: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady that the future of Channel 4 is an important matter. Whether or not the discussion with the Cabinet Office Minister, which took place on 3 September, constituted the beginning of an examination, when actually a decision was not taken to begin that examination until about four weeks later, does not seem to be a centrally important matter in the future of Channel 4. We did decide that it was sensible to carry out an examination. That examination is still under way. We have still not yet reached decisions about the best way forward for Channel 4, but I look forward to having that discussion with Channel 4 in the very near future.

T3. [905315] **Derek Thomas** (St Ives) (Con): There is a great aspiration in Cornwall to have a sports stadium. The Minister will know of this aspiration. What financial or other support can his Department give to deliver the stadium for Cornwall?

**Mr Whittingdale**: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I pay tribute to his efforts particularly to bring about the stadium for Cornwall, which the Government are committed to. As he knows, I have already held two meetings with interested parties in Cornwall, which he was able to come to. I understand that good progress is being made, and that a draft planning application is now going before the council. I hope that that will lead to progress, and that we will see commencement of work on a stadium in the near future.

T4. [905317] **Mr David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): What protections can my constituents and others expect on mobile phone roaming charges in Europe in the event of an exit on 24 June?

**The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey)**: That is a very good question. Britain was at the forefront of negotiating the reduction in roaming charges, working with our European partners, and it is yet another example of the benefit to consumers and citizens of being a member of the European Union.

**Mr Robin Walker** (Worcester) (Con): After the huge success of the London Paralympics, we all saw how Paralympic sport can inspire. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating my six Worcester constituents, who have been selected to represent ParalympicsGB in the wheelchair basketball at the Rio Paralympics?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett)**: I should be absolutely delighted to do so. I think it is very important that we wish all our athletes great success in Rio. The Paralympics are just as important as the Olympics and we wish them all success in their ventures.

T2. [905312] **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): On Tuesday I met Jean Cameron, the project director for the Paisley 2021 bid for UK City of Culture, for the third time. Despite my asking the Deputy Leader of the House a few weeks ago to give

the Secretary of State a nudge, the bidding cities for 2021 are still none the wiser about the dates involved in the process. May I encourage the Secretary of State to get on with it and allow them to plan appropriately?

**Mr Vaizey:** I certainly take the hon. Gentleman's points on board. We will make sure that the bidding process is as transparent and clear as possible and we will make the rules as clear as possible. While we are talking about culture, it is important to mark today as the anniversary of the publication of the first Book of Common Prayer by Archbishop Cranmer on 9 June 1569, following the Anglican Church's break with Europe—I mean Rome!

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for his email on Monday about superfast broadband which I am sending out to my parishes. May I raise with him the problem of not spots in rural areas? What is being done following the cessation of the mobile infrastructure project run by Arqiva?

**Mr Vaizey:** You will be pleased to know, Mr Speaker, that I have run out of anniversaries.

The mobile infrastructure project was a fantastic success, with 75 sites established, but it has been overtaken by the emergency services programme, where the plan is to build 300 sites to complete the network cover—5,000 km of roads. I hope my hon. Friend's constituents will benefit. In the next few months we will have a clearer idea of where those masts are going and which not spots they are tackling, and I will keep him informed.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): There has been much discussion in the House in recent days about world war three. There is a real risk that world war three will start in my constituency between residents and a local school on the subject of footballs that keep falling into residents' gardens. Can one of the Ministers advise whether there might be grants available that would help stop this problem?

**Mr Whittingdale:** I am sorry to learn of the problems faced by residents in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency. We are keen to encourage sporting participation and excellence in sport. Perhaps better aiming in kicking the balls will help to alleviate the problem. That is certainly something we would seek to encourage.

## HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

*The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—*

### Palace of Westminster Artwork

1. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What assessment the Commission has made of the effect on hon. Members and visitors of the level of diversity represented in artwork displayed in the Palace of Westminster. [905328]

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington): No formal assessment has been made. However, the strategic priorities for developing the parliamentary arts collection are reviewed by the Speaker's Advisory Committee on Works

of Art at the start of each Parliament. The Committee makes targeted acquisitions that reflect the interests of the House, and makes changes to the presentation of works of art to promote engagement by the visiting public. The Committee has already decided to give further consideration in the current Parliament to the representation of the collection of parliamentarians of black, Asian or minority ethnic origin.

**Chi Onwurah:** In the six years that I have had the privilege of serving in this House, I have often felt that the dead white men in tights who people the walls of this Palace follow me around, sometimes into the Chamber itself. As the answer to my parliamentary question showed, there are only two representations of BAME people in the whole of this Palace. In a few weeks, children from English Martyrs Primary School in Newcastle will make the journey to visit Parliament. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that they should be overawed and impressed by the Palace, but feel that they are part of its present as well as its future?

**Tom Brake:** I agree entirely with the hon. Lady's point. She will, I hope, be pleased to hear that on 5 July the Advisory Committee will discuss this very subject. I hope the Committee will be able to provide her with a clear action plan that will help to address her concerns.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is vital that we embrace diversity at all levels to ensure that history is remembered correctly. We have portraits and statues of Queen Victoria in the House of Lords. Does the Commission agree that Members and visitors, particularly the latter, are astounded by the architecture, colours and sheer splendour of the Palace, and that there is unlikely to be anyone who leaves feeling negative or even discriminated against?

**Tom Brake:** I am happy to agree with that comment.

## House of Commons Employees

2. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What discussions the Commission has had with trade union representatives on the terms and conditions of employees of the House. [905330]

**Tom Brake:** The Commission delegates to the Executive Committee responsibility for negotiating changes to terms and conditions of House staff with the recognised trade unions. The House is currently in pay negotiations for the financial year 2016-17 with the unions representing staff in the main A to E pay bands and the catering pay bands. These negotiations are being undertaken in the context of the general pay constraint within the public sector and the requirement for the pay of House staff to remain broadly in line with that of the home civil service.

**Christian Matheson:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that answer. I am concerned to learn that certain members of the catering department are having to work double shifts in order simply to make ends meet. Can he confirm that, as part of the pay negotiations, staff will be paid the London living wage, not the Government's bogus living wage? Does he agree that perhaps paying

an extra 5p or 10p for a cup of coffee or a meaty wrap would be money well spent if we were paying our staff correctly?

**Tom Brake:** I am happy to confirm that staff are indeed paid the London living wage, and to ensure that the hon. Gentleman receives a response to his question about double shifts. I am also happy to raise his suggestion that a tariff should be applied to sandwiches in this place to ensure that pay is raised in the way he has indicated.

## LEADER OF THE HOUSE

*The Leader of the House was asked—*

### Northern Ireland Question Time

3. **Danny Kinahan** (South Antrim) (UUP): If he will introduce topical oral questions to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. [905332]

**The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** We gave this matter careful consideration, but the Leader of the House recently wrote to the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee stating the reasons we will not be introducing topical questions to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. As a consequence of devolution, the range of issues that are the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Office is narrower than for most other Departments. The introduction of topical questions might lead to a situation in which some questions fall outside the range of the Secretary of State's responsibilities.

**Danny Kinahan:** I thank the Deputy Leader of the House for that answer. I do not want to stop all of us playing a part in each other's areas and constituencies, but when we look at Question Time we see that the same questions are repeated, which minimises the number of Members who can get in. Topical questions might be another way of increasing participation and having more varied questions.

**Dr Coffey:** Each Member is responsible for the questions they submit. Because of the way the process of tabling questions works, the Table Office is able to ascertain whether a question relates to a devolved matter or is the responsibility of a UK Government Minister answering at this Dispatch Box.

**Mr Nigel Dodds** (Belfast North) (DUP): Would not one way of increasing participation in Northern Ireland affairs, especially by Northern Ireland Members, be to have more frequent meetings of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee?

**Dr Coffey:** That is an interesting suggestion. It is not one to which I can commit, but I will certainly take it away.

**Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I appreciate the comments of the Deputy Leader of the House. However, in relation to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, I suggest that members of the

public are entitled to expect members of the Government representing those posts to be subject to the same level of scrutiny as their peers around the Cabinet table. I therefore hope that further consideration will be given to introducing topical questions for all those areas.

**Dr Coffey:** As I have already indicated, we have given this matter careful consideration and, for the reasons I have set out, decided that it is not appropriate to introduce topical questions at Northern Ireland Question Time—and that would also be true for Wales and Scotland.

**Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): In response to the rather disappointing answers from the Deputy Leader of the House, may I ask whether she will consider introducing topical oral questions for Scotland and Wales?

**Dr Coffey:** I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place; I think that this is the first time he has asked a question from the Dispatch Box. I genuinely want to put across quite carefully the level of consideration that we have given to this matter. The Table Office is a very useful filter that enables us to ask questions that are in order. The risk is that Members could end up being ruled out of order while trying to ask their topical questions, which would not be good for their reputations either.

## HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

*The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—*

### Parliamentary Estate: Refurbishment

4. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): How much was spent on the refurbishment of the north entrance to the parliamentary estate in the last Parliament. [905333]

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington): Some £55,958 was spent in the last Parliament, and £240,997 has been spent to date in this Parliament. The total forecast budget for the project is £423,902. All those figures include VAT.

**Diana Johnson:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that answer. My point is about cyclists being excluded from the Curtis Green entrance, even though it is on the new cycle super-highway. Given the need for cyclists to be able to negotiate busy junctions safely, and the fact that they have to use the Derby Gate and Carriage Gates entrances, what assessment was made before the decision was taken not to allow them to use the Curtis Green entrance?

**Tom Brake:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I am quite happy to investigate that matter and to write to her setting out the reasons for that. As a cyclist, I too would certainly like to see enhanced cycle facilities and entrances to the Palace.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): It is not just a question of cycles being able to enter the estate; it is a question of the danger to cyclists. As a car turns in—I have had this experience in a car—it has to cut across the cycle lane and there is a real risk that, if the driver is not really attentive, a cyclist may hit the car and be in danger of death.

**Tom Brake:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is certainly important that car drivers are attentive to the risks cyclists face every day as they cycle through London.

## LEADER OF THE HOUSE

*The Leader of the House was asked—*

### Divisions

5. **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): How long the House spent voting in the 2015-16 Session. [905334]

6. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): How long the House spent voting in the 2015-16 Session. [905335]

**The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** The Government do not collect this information and do not have the information available. However, the House publishes a record of the time taken on all types of business in the House, and that will be available in the next Sessional Return when it is published in due course. As has been published, hon. Members had the opportunity to participate in 269 Divisions during the last Session, but the total time taken for all business that gave rise to one or more Divisions was 471 hours and 46 minutes.

**John Mc Nally:** We will all be aware that on Monday night we began voting on the Investigatory Powers Bill at 8 pm and finished voting at 11.14 pm. Members' meetings and other engagements were disrupted for three and a quarter hours for only four votes. Our colleagues in the Scottish Parliament are able to vote on all Divisions at once. What consideration has the Deputy Leader of the House given to a daily unified decision time?

**Dr Coffey:** The Government made sure that on Monday a decent amount of time for debate was protected rather than compressed. On having a decision time, as in the Scottish Parliament, I suggest that separating decisions on an important piece of legislation from the discussion of them is not to the benefit of that discussion. We should try to ensure that we vote on matters that the House has debated. As we have seen in many debates, people have changed their minds as a consequence of listening to what was said.

**Alan Brown:** One of the defences the Leader of the House has previously given for the current voting system is that it allows Members to grab a Minister in the voting Lobby. The thing is that guys on the SNP Benches are never in the same voting Lobby as Ministers. The 269 Divisions in the last Session meant that we spent roughly 60 hours of our time hanging around in the voting Lobbies, which is equivalent to a football player's

entire season in the premier league, so are we going to see electronic voting or the continuation of an inter-party league?

**Dr Coffey:** The hon. Gentleman has made an estimate based on the information I have just given him, but a lot of Members value the opportunity to see each other in the Lobbies. I recognise what he says about SNP Members often being in a different Lobby from the Government, but perhaps he should learn from his more experienced neighbours on the Labour Benches, who certainly use the voting process to grab Ministers when they leave the Lobby. Frankly, this Parliament spends more time scrutinising legislation than any other Parliament in the world, and I genuinely believe that our voting system is appropriate for that.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): I thank you, Mr Speaker, and the Leader of the House for changing the list of initials under which we go through the Lobbies to vote. Moving the Gs to the left-hand column has speeded up the voting process, and as an H, it is now bliss to vote. I might add that I know from personal experience that it is very easy to vote against the Government and then to nip to the other Lobby to wait for the Minister to come out and ask them a relevant question.

**Dr Coffey:** I was trying to suggest that that was what Opposition Members tend to do, but I recognise what my hon. Friend has said. As a C, getting the Gs in with us has seemed—apart from the fact that I now vote in the same queue as my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, who is a G—to increase the time it takes for us to vote. Nevertheless, we are all happy together in our Division Lobby.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): While I am sure we are all very sorry that the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) had his dinner plans messed around on Monday night, may I urge my hon. Friend not to listen to those people who come here and within five minutes want to change long-established proceedings in this House that many of us value?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** Of course, matters of voting are ultimately for the House to decide, although I do not sense an extended appetite for the changes suggested.

### English Votes for English Laws

7. **Mr David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): What plans he has to review English votes for English laws. [905336]

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** We have fulfilled our manifesto commitment in introducing English votes for English laws, which we believe will continue to strengthen the Union. However, the Government will undertake a review of the English votes for English laws procedure in the autumn, as we said we would, drawing on the work of the Procedure Committee, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, and the House of Lords Constitution Committee.

**Mr Hanson:** Some aspects of the Wales Bill currently before the House are solely Wales matters on which every Member of this House can vote, and yet if similar provision were put in place in England, my vote as a Welsh Member of Parliament would not count. Is that fair?

**Dr Coffey:** All Members' votes in this House count. The process is very clear. The change that we introduced ensured that matters that are devolved must now have the explicit consent of English Members. On the Wales Bill, the right hon. Gentleman will recognise that we are transferring powers from this House to the Welsh Assembly,

creating a stronger Welsh Assembly, and as a consequence we believe that all Members should be involved in that discussion.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Helen Hayes—not here.

## International Syria Support Group: Airdrops

10.31 am

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to make a statement on the International Syria Support Group's plans to commence airdrops to besieged areas in Syria.

**The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington)**: I have been asked to reply, Mr Speaker. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is giving evidence to the Intelligence and Security Committee this morning, and the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who is responsible for the middle east, is travelling abroad on ministerial business.

The Government's objective remains a political settlement that allows Syria to become a stable, peaceful state with an inclusive Government with whom we can work to tackle Daesh and other extremists. Only when this happens will stability return to the region and the flow of people fleeing Syria and seeking refuge in Europe stop. To achieve that goal, we need to get political negotiations between the Syrian parties back on track. The International Syria Support Group has made it clear that in order to create the best environment for talks to succeed, there needs to be a comprehensive cessation of hostilities leading to a full ceasefire, and sustained, unfettered access for humanitarian aid. Talks are now paused because progress on both those tracks has been insufficient. That is why we are pressing hard for an end to the current violations of the cessation of hostilities, the majority of which are down to the Assad regime. It is also why we need to see an improvement in humanitarian access to besieged and hard-to-reach areas inside Syria. Both these points were agreed by all members of the International Syria Support Group in Munich in February this year.

However, in the light of the continuing dire humanitarian picture, at the most recent ISSG meeting in Vienna on 17 May, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary proposed humanitarian airdrops by the UN World Food Programme in besieged areas in Syria if access could not be achieved by road by the beginning of June. That deadline has of course now passed. We welcome the arrival of some limited aid in Darayya and Muadhmiya over the last few days, and we note, too, that the Syrian Government have agreed in principle to allow land access by the United Nations to the majority of areas requested for the month of June. Such progress as we have seen is undoubtedly the result of international pressure, including from the possibility of airdrops. Nevertheless, it is now crucial that the ISSG should hold the Assad regime to account for delivery of these commitments.

United Kingdom officials are meeting their ISSG counterparts and UN officials in Geneva today to continue that work, and the UN is pressing the Assad regime to allow airdrops if access by road is not permitted. We remain clear that airdrops are a last resort. Land access is more effective, more efficient and safer, both for those needing the aid and for those delivering it. The UN has plans in place to begin airdrops if they are needed, but

it is clear that in a complex and dangerous environment such as Syria, this will not be straightforward. We will continue to support the UN in its efforts, but if the regime is not willing to allow sufficient land access or airdrops to those in desperate need, the ISSG should consider very carefully what steps might be taken to deliver the aid that is so desperately needed.

**Diana Johnson**: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. As the Minister has pointed out, this is a clear humanitarian issue. There are 582,000 people living in besieged areas in Syria. The conditions for the men, women and children in these areas is beyond what many of us can comprehend. In the words of the UK's special envoy to the UN,

"It's a concept from medieval times: starvation as a weapon of war and purposefully withholding lifesaving medicines."

That is what the Assad regime is doing. As the Minister confirmed, the British Foreign Secretary gave a deadline for that to stop, and that deadline expired a week ago. Since then, aid has reached a few areas, but that aid has not always included food, and we know that children are still starving.

The Foreign Secretary said that the International Syria Support Group would commence airdrops into besieged areas if aid was not allowed in by 1 June. He argued that that had the support of Iran and Russia, and he indicated that their support would be sufficient for airdrops to commence. Yesterday, however, the UN briefed that it had made a request to the Syrian Government to commence airlifts, not airdrops. It seems as though airlifts or airdrops are subject to the whim of the Assad regime. The Foreign Secretary made a promise to the people in those besieged areas and sent a clear message to the Assad regime.

As the humanitarian situation appears to be bleak and the position of Assad seems to have been strengthened, will the Minister answer these four questions? First, the current proposal appears to be for airlifts to be led by the World Food Programme, with the consent of the Assad regime. Can the Minister confirm whether there is a timetable for that to happen? If there is no consent from the Assad regime, what will happen next? Secondly, what happens if the Syrian Government refuse permission for that to happen? Thirdly, is the position of Iran and Russia the reason why airdrops have not occurred? If so, did the Foreign Secretary overstate their position on 24 May, or did they subsequently change their position? Finally, what implications does the Minister think the ISSG's failure to agree to airdrops has for the Syrian peace process?

**Mr Lidington**: On the hon. Lady's last point, there is no question but that the appalling humanitarian situation inside Syria makes it more difficult to have any hope of rebuilding a modicum of trust that might lead to political progress. I agreed with her description of what is going on inside Syria on the ground, and of the attitude taken by the Assad regime. I do not think anyone should be under any illusions about the fact that it is deliberately using the denial of access to humanitarian aid as a political and military weapon.

It is important that the United Nations, which is accepted by all as impartial and peaceful in intent, should be in the lead both in the talks with the regime and in the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Given

the nature of the military conflict inside Syria and the nature of the air defences, both Syrian and Russian, that are available, the best outcome would be agreed terms of access, either over land or by air, for the World Food Programme assistance. That is what was agreed and is happening with regard to an area that is being besieged by Daesh forces in one part of Syria. That would be better than other powers trying to intervene.

As I said earlier, if the Assad regime does not deliver on its commitments, the ISSG will have to return to this matter. We will have to take stock during today's meeting in Geneva of how far the talks between the UN and the Assad regime have taken us and what chances there now are. Iran and Russia made commitments earlier this year to support the delivery of humanitarian aid to the people who are in need. Those are the powers that have influence over Bashar al-Assad and his regime, and it is their responsibility to use that influence to save the lives of these people who are in such desperate need of assistance.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I intend to run the exchanges on this question until 11 o'clock, but not beyond that. I know that colleagues will take their cue from that advice.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): The Minister is right that Russia is the key to this. Only Russia can persuade the Assad regime to acquiesce. What steps are the Minister, the Department for International Development or both of them together taking to put pressure on Russia to do just that?

**Mr Lidington:** Russia is the key player in terms of influence over Assad and, of course, the key sponsor of Syria's military capability. We use every opportunity, both within the ISSG, of which Russia is a full member, and in other diplomatic exchanges with Russia at official and ministerial level, to emphasise the importance of Russia delivering on the commitments she has made.

**Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Some towns in Syria have not received food aid since 2012. We have an absolute moral responsibility to protect civilians who are suffering the wider effects of a conflict in which the UK is now an active participant. No expense has been spared in dropping UK high-tech missiles on the country, but it is bread, not bombs, that the people in Syria need, and it is incumbent on us to do all we can to make sure that they get it. May I ask the Minister why eight days have passed since the UN deadline, with no tangible action? Are we really asking for permission from Assad to feed the very people he has starved? The Minister will be aware that malnourished and sick children need specialist care that cannot be provided by airdrop. What action are the Government taking to re-establish road access to these desperate people?

**Mr Lidington:** It is the United Nations that is talking to the Assad regime about getting access, the United Nations that has the good offices to make those approaches, and the United Nations that is in charge of delivering the humanitarian assistance. That is the way forward

that we judge at the moment is most likely to lead to a successful outcome that is safe for those receiving the aid and those delivering it.

There are parts of Syria where high-level airdrops of humanitarian assistance might be of help if we could not get overland access, but that is not a precise way of giving help. There are other parts of Syria where the nature of the conflict, or the densely populated urban character of the communities we are trying to help, means that we would have to bring in helicopters and could not rely on high-level airdrops at all. That again emphasises the complexity of the task and why the best outcome, for all its imperfections, would be the UN securing access, with the agreement of the regime, either over land or, failing that, for airborne assistance.

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): What material support is the United Kingdom giving the United Nations in preparation for access being granted, as we hope it will be?

**Mr Lidington:** As my hon. Friend knows, we have committed very large sums—£2.3 million—to humanitarian assistance in the crisis in Syria and its neighbouring countries. We are ready to provide additional support, if the UN wants it, for an expanded airdrop operation in the besieged areas.

**Keith Vaz** (Leicester East) (Lab): As the Minister knows, the holy month of Ramadan began on Monday. There are millions of Syrian refugees in the countries immediately adjoining Syria. Will he confirm that our humanitarian efforts are continuing, so that those people are helped where they are, rather than having to make the perilous journey to the Greek or Turkish border?

**Mr Lidington:** I agree with the right hon. Gentleman about the importance of this. After all, people in the camps moved across the Aegean last summer because the United Nations was not getting sufficient funds to maintain either food rations or hours of schooling at previously agreed levels. We are certainly committed, and we are pressing all the countries and international organisations that, at the recent London conference on Syria, committed themselves to spending more to deliver on those pledges fully and promptly.

We welcome the opposition High Negotiations Committee's suggestion that there be a Ramadan truce inside Syria. We hope that that might be an opportunity to stop further bloodshed.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): It is depressing that starvation is again being used as a weapon of war, particularly when one man, President Putin, could make one phone call to his friend, President Assad, to remove many of the barriers to international aid. Assuming that the UN gets permission to deliver international aid, have we offered the use of British military bases, particularly those in Cyprus, to allow that delivery to happen quickly?

**Mr Lidington:** We have not been asked to provide that kind of assistance to the UN. Obviously, we would consider any request that we received from the UN seriously and sympathetically, but my understanding is

[*Mr Lidington*]

that the UN would prefer to use civilian airports, because that would emphasise to all parties the humanitarian, rather than political, nature of the flights.

**Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Bashar al-Assad's father-in-law lives in London. He is a retired doctor. He used to boast—he has boasted to me—that he had considerable influence over his son-in-law. Has anyone in the Foreign Office met Bashar al-Assad's father-in-law? That might be one additional approach that we could try.

**Mr Lidington**: I do not know whether there has been a recent conversation with Assad's father-in-law, but I will ensure that that point is noted in the Foreign Office, and will perhaps write to the right hon. Lady.

**Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): The UN said on Thursday that helicopters would have to be used as air bridges in 15 of the 19 besieged areas because they are densely populated. In reality, the UN, working with the World Food Programme, would use helicopters, which need permission to land. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that means that it is vital to use diplomatic channels to urge Russia to insist that Syria open up those channels?

**Mr Lidington**: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. This is an important test of Russia's professed commitment both to the UN and its humanitarian aid work, and to a political solution in Syria.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): If Assad and Russia's shameful blocking of aid by land and air continues, will the Government redouble efforts with our allies to ensure that Assad is eventually brought to justice for crimes against humanity and war crimes?

**Mr Lidington**: The first objective must be to secure humanitarian assistance to those who are in desperate need. Then we need to achieve a strategy for a political settlement in Syria. When that is in place, there will indeed need to be a time when individuals who are responsible for the most appalling crimes can be held to account.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend makes important points, and I am pleased that I agree with everything he says—not something I have usually done of late when he has been at the Dispatch Box. Will he join me in praising the work of our former colleague, Stephen O'Brien, who is now the United Nations emergency relief co-ordinator in this area?

**Mr Lidington**: I am very happy to do so. Stephen was a good friend of mine when he was a Member of the House, and while he served here he had a sincere and enduring commitment to international development and humanitarian assistance. He is showing real dynamism and leadership in his work on behalf of the UN.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): The Opposition are right to raise the nightmare of the humanitarian consequences of this situation, but are not the Government absolutely right to proceed with the greatest caution in

a situation with wholly unpredictable consequences, and particularly to reject the facile solutions of military interventions, even when they are put forward by a past Prime Minister with a record of shooting first and thinking later?

**Mr Lidington**: In terms of this urgent question, the key objective must surely be to find the means by which we can get humanitarian aid to those who need it as quickly and effectively as we can; I hope that we can all agree on that point.

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The question of what Russia can do has already been raised. Can the Minister provide examples of what the Russians may have done so far, or give any positive news, that would suggest that they may be about to change their approach?

**Mr Lidington**: I would like to be more encouraging in my response, but so far the Russian approach has been frankly disappointing. The United Nations has been allowed access to help people who are besieged by Daesh forces, but those people are loyal to the Assad regime, so the Russians and the regime have been happy to allow that humanitarian assistance. A real test of Russia's intentions is whether it will bring to bear the pressure that it could on Assad to act before the people we are talking about suffer further.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister has confessed that children are dying for want of food and medicine. May we concentrate on the primacy of the United Nation's role, and on those fantastic people in the International Rescue Committee, Médecins Sans Frontières and Save the Children who have real expertise? Is he regularly consulting those people on the ground?

**Mr Lidington**: The Department for International Development is in regular contact with those organisations, as is the United Nations, which has long-standing relationships with all international humanitarian non-governmental organisations. As the hon. Gentleman will know, a large proportion of the British Government's aid assistance to humanitarian causes in Syria and the surrounding states is channelled through precisely the organisations he has listed.

**Mark Durkan** (Foyle) (SDLP): The vexed complexities that the Minister has referred to, and the acute sensitivity of current UN efforts, are understood by the Syrian refugees whom I met in my constituency on Sunday, and they explained the dire plight of their starving compatriots. Their basic question to me as a Member of the House is this: why can powers not marshal the capacity and resolve to supply the means of life, given that we have shown that we can deploy the means of death?

**Mr Lidington**: One must take into account the military realities on the ground. We are talking about a regime in Syria that is besieging most of the communities whose plight we are discussing. The regime has formidable air defences of its own, and Russia has deployed its own air defence measures inside Syrian territory. For that reason, we believe that the safest and most effective means of providing humanitarian access would still be for the



UN to agree terms under which that aid can be delivered. If that proves not to work, we must return to this issue, as I have indicated.

**Joan Ryan** (Enfield North) (Lab): The conditions on the ground are clearly very challenging. As the Minister has said, many of the besieged areas are built-up, urban areas with no suitable space for a drop zone, and obviously high-altitude drops could harm people on the ground. Will he continue therefore to press for access for aid delivered by truck convoy and helicopter?

**Mr Lidington:** Yes, we shall, and we will continue that in Geneva this afternoon.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. According to the UN, 600,000 people are in danger of starvation, but the Syrian Government say that airdrops are not necessary because there is no starvation, so there is clearly a difference of opinion. We need to secure support from the Syrian Government and the Russians. We in Britain pride ourselves on our tradition of helping others, both domestically and abroad. If we cannot secure land access and if the only way is by air, will the Government support the UN in pushing ahead with that to ensure that there is not a humanitarian crisis and that people do not starve?

**Mr Lidington:** Yes. It was my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary who pressed at the previous ISSG meeting for airdrops to be considered as a last resort, and if we cannot secure the access that the UN, with our support, is seeking, we will have to return to that possibility.

## Business of the House

10.56 am

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling):** The business for next week is as follows:

**MONDAY 13 JUNE**—Conclusion of the remaining stages of the Policing and Crime Bill (day 2).

**TUESDAY 14 JUNE**—Second Reading of the Wales Bill.

**WEDNESDAY 15 JUNE**—Opposition day (2nd allotted day). There will be a debate on the economic benefits of the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union. The debate will arise on an Opposition motion.

**THURSDAY 16 JUNE**—As you will be aware, Mr Speaker, we go into recess until after the referendum, so the House will not be sitting.

**FRIDAY 17 JUNE**—The House will not be sitting.

The business for the week commencing 27 June, when we return, will include:

**MONDAY 27 JUNE**—Motions to approve Ways and Means resolutions on the Finance Bill, followed by Committee of the whole House of the Finance Bill (day 1).

**TUESDAY 28 JUNE**—Conclusion of Committee of the whole House of the Finance Bill (day 2), followed by motions to approve Ways and Means resolutions on the Finance Bill.

**WEDNESDAY 29 JUNE**—Opposition half day (3rd allotted day—part one). There will be a half day debate on an Opposition motion, subject to be announced, followed by a general debate on the centenary of the Battle of the Somme.

**THURSDAY 30 JUNE**—Business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

**FRIDAY 1 JULY**—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 4 July will include:

**MONDAY 4 JULY**—Estimates (1st allotted day). Subject to be confirmed by the Liaison Committee. At 10 pm, the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

**Chris Bryant:** Let us start with a brief quiz. What is the shortest ever piece of British legislation? Answer: the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918, which in 27 crisp words enabled women to stand for Parliament for the first time. As we commemorate the 150th anniversary of the founding of the campaign for women's representation, it is worth remembering that the campaign is often long but the moment of justice is short and very, very sweet.

What a week it has been: torrential rain; floods in the SNP offices; downpours in the lifts; thunder and lightning—very, very frightening. Clearly, God is very angry with the leave campaign. The Prime Minister was on the Terrace on Tuesday evening enjoying a sneaky fag—no, not that kind—and some congenial company, but then he was mostly chatting with Labour MPs because Tories will not talk to him any more. In fact, there has been so much blue-on-blue action this week that the air is getting as blue as the Culture Secretary's DVD collection.

[Chris Bryant]

The Tory Government in waiting, also known as the Justice Secretary and the former Mayor of London, have been touring the kingdom in their blunder bus like Dastardly and Muttley in the mean machine. The special thing about Dastardly and Muttley, of course, is that no matter how much they cheated—and, boy, did they cheat!—they never won a single race. On the one occasion when they nearly won, Dick Dastardly stopped just before the finishing line to pose for his picture, as it was a photo finish. How very Boris! As Dick Dastardly always said, “Drat, drat and double drat!”

When will the Leader of the House publish the Government’s response to the Procedure Committee’s report on private Members’ Bills? The House is hoping that the Government are genuine about reform, because the system, frankly, is a monumental waste of time and a fraud on democracy.

Can the Leader of the House explain something to me? He has announced the 13 days that are for consideration of private Members’ Bills, but the first one this year is not until 21 October. In previous years, it has always been in September—and early September at that. Why so late this year? It makes it virtually impossible before the end of January for any Member to get a Bill through the House of Commons, let alone through the House of Lords. Are the Government deliberately sabotaging private Members’ Bills even before they have started?

On 14 January, my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) asked the Leader of the House whether the rules of the House could be changed to allow Welsh to be used in the Welsh Grand Committee when it sits here in Westminster. I understand that the language of this House is, of course, English, but Welsh is the mother tongue of many of my compatriots and constituents, so is it not time that we allowed Welsh in the Welsh Grand Committee?

We are about to consider emergency legislation on electoral registration for the referendum. It is obviously a delight that so many new people have tried to register. In the last three months alone, there have been 4.5 million extra attempts. Even allowing for the fact that some of those will be people just checking that they have already registered, that is the equivalent of 63 extra parliamentary seats in areas with high numbers of students and ethnic minorities. Would it not be bizarre in the extreme for the Government to insist on the Boundary Commission using the old December 2015 register to determine the boundaries and number of seats allocated to Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England—or is this just gerrymandering?

Our Opposition day debate, as the Leader of the House announced, will be on the economic benefits of the UK’s membership of the European Union, because the last thing our very fragile economic recovery needs is the prolonged bout of uncertainty and the self-inflicted recession that Brexit would undoubtedly bring. We always achieve far more by our common endeavour than by going it alone. John Donne was right that no man is an island, and these islands are not a hermetically sealed unit. If we want to tackle climate change, environmental degradation, international crime and terrorism; if we want a seat at the table when the major decisions affecting our continent are made; if we want to shape Europe and fashion our own destiny: we have to lead Europe, not leave it.

Is it not fitting that on the Wednesday after the referendum we shall commemorate the Battle of the Somme, in which there were at least 200,000 French, 420,000 British and 620,000 German casualties? The continent that has been at war in every generation and in every century, that has spilt quantities of blood on the seas and the oceans, on the beaches, on the landing grounds, in the fields and in the streets and in the hills is now—thank God—at peace. We should not ever risk our children’s future: remain, remain, remain.

**Chris Grayling:** I start by marking the anniversaries of the campaigns to get votes for women and to get women into Parliament, which we are currently celebrating. I commend everyone involved in the art exhibition and new work of art in Westminster Hall and indeed all who came together in this Chamber last night for the photograph to mark the occasion. It is a very important development in our history that we should never forget. It is not so many years ago that, inexplicably, women were not given the vote and did not have the right to sit in this House. To our generation, that is incomprehensible. It is a change that always should have happened, and I am very glad that it did.

With apologies to the Scottish nationalists, I offer my good wishes to the England, Wales and Northern Ireland football teams in the European championship that is due to start this weekend. I very much hope that all of us here will cheer on all the home nations as they play their matches in the weeks ahead. [Interruption.] I am asked what this has got to do with the Leader of the House, but half the things that the shadow Leader of the House mentions have nothing at all to do with the business of the House—talk about pots and kettles, Mr Speaker! [Interruption.]

If I can shut up the shadow Leader of the House for a moment, let me confirm something that he would like to hear. We will be flying the rainbow flag from the top of Portcullis House to mark Pride weekend in London from 24 to 27 June. It looks like that has shut him up, Mr Speaker.

On the boundaries issues, let me remind Members that the current boundaries are based on figures from the 2001 census. In no way is that fair; in no way is it right and proper. In future, the boundaries will be based on figures that are updated every five years, and it is right and proper that, given concerns about the nature of our register, reforms be put in place to ensure that it is robust, appropriate and honest in a democracy.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the private Members’ Bills report. We will respond to it shortly, as is due process.

I have given question of the Welsh Grand Committee careful thought, as I said I would a few weeks ago in the House. English is the language of the House of Commons, and it would cost taxpayers’ money to make a change at this point. I therefore think that English should continue to be the language of the House, although if someone who cannot speak English arrives here, we may need to look at the issue again.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned next week’s Opposition day debate on Europe. I was delighted to see that, notwithstanding the lively debate we are having in this country at the moment, the April figures for our

manufacturing sector showed an improvement, which is a sign that the economic improvement over which we have presided since 2010 is continuing.

I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman managed to pay a visit to my constituency this week, and to speak to my local Labour party. He was, and always is, most welcome in Epsom and Ewell. I am sure that, in the event that things become too tough in Rhondda and the threat from Plaid Cymru becomes too great, my local Labour party will be delighted to welcome him as its candidate in 2020.

**Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): Given the repeated poor performances by Govia Thameslink Railway, which are adversely affecting thousands of my constituents, will a Minister make a statement on what is being done to improve services on the line?

**Chris Grayling:** I am well aware of that issue, which has been raised by a number of other Members on both sides of the House. I know that the rail Minister is concerned about it, and the company should certainly be immensely concerned about it. This is obviously a difficult time because of the improvements at London Bridge, but the Secretary of State for Transport will be here later this month and I shall expect my hon. Friend and others to raise the issue then, because I know that it is causing concern to a great many constituents.

**Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for his statement, although I suspect that the business on 27 June may be rather more interesting than what is currently billed.

This week, Ministers appear to have been working tirelessly. It is just a shame that they have spent all their energy on attacking each other rather than running the country effectively. That is why we need an urgent debate on the Government's abject failure to manage the online voter registration system. Amid that embarrassing disaster, the employment Minister has called the Prime Minister "shameful" and "out of touch", and the Justice Secretary has labelled the Government's own policies "corrosive of public trust". Imagine what the rest of us think, Mr Speaker.

Let us also have a debate on immigration policy. Some current Tory Ministers have been touring the country declaring that when Brexit is secured Britain will kick migrants from the EU out and pave the way to letting more migrants from the Commonwealth in. Aye, we believe them—not. At the same time, other Ministers are trying to deport people like the Brain family from Dingwall, who are from another Commonwealth country. While all that has been going on, the Justice Secretary has stated that he wants to crack down on immigration to the UK altogether. Ministers are saying one thing to one part of the country, and telling a different tale to another. Just who are people to believe?

You will be aware, Mr Speaker, that the debate on the Investigatory Powers Bill earlier this week featured a range of patronising and condescending remarks by Tory Back Benchers, directed particularly at women on these Benches. That was unfortunately repeated during yesterday's Westminster Hall debate on the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia, in which I participated. There were continual suggestions that we "don't understand". May we have a debate on "mansplaining", and the fact that

male Tory Back Benchers are not the only ones to have been elected to the House with an understanding of difficult and complex issues? The House will then find that women are very good at it too. I shall be happy to elaborate further if the Leader of the House needs any help in explaining that to his Back Benchers.

**Chris Grayling:** Let me start by reminding the hon. Lady that, if I am not mistaken, a few days ago the leader of her own party criticised the European referendum campaign of which she was part. I am not certain that the SNP is entirely aligned on this one.

The hon. Lady told us about the work that the House had done this week. Notwithstanding the fact that we are having the most serious debate that we have had in this country for a generation, the House is getting on with the important business of protecting the country from the security threats we face. I was grateful to the Labour party for the constructive way in which it approached that debate, but it was disappointing that, on a matter of national security, the SNP lined up in the Division Lobby against measures that we believe are essential to protect our citizens.

The hon. Lady talks about the legal position of migrants. As we are having this debate and people will be listening to it, it is worth being very clear about what the position is. Under the Vienna convention, regardless of the referendum, the legal position of anyone who lives in another country is that their position is protected if the nature of the residency arrangements in that country changes. I do not think that any of us, on either side of this debate, should give an alternative impression to people who might be worried about their position afterwards.

I would never in any way condone patronising comments towards women in this House. However, it is perfectly fair to say that the Scottish National party does not understand the importance of defence issues to this country. Its policies make no sense. Its arguments would do damage to Scotland, economically and in defence terms, and if we challenge them on them, it is right and proper to do so.

**Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger** (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): May I come back to the thorny issue of Avon and Somerset police force? The chief constable is under investigation. He and the police and crime commissioner tried to come to see me, and they are trying to influence MPs about what is going on with the serious sexual allegation against the chief constable. He is still in post. It is causing problems with the police force in Avon and Somerset. We really need a debate in this place to find out what is happening. This is a sizeable police force, covering Bristol and the Somerset area. Unless we get to the bottom of what is happening, we may have at least a problem with justice and possibly a travesty of justice.

**Chris Grayling:** My hon. Friend makes his point in his customary robust way, and he clearly raises issues that will be of very great concern to his constituents and to others elsewhere in the county. The Home Secretary will be here on Monday, so he will have a direct opportunity to raise this issue with her, and I am sure that he will do so.

**Mr Nigel Dodds** (Belfast North) (DUP): May we have a debate in the near future on the political situation in Northern Ireland—thankfully, not because of any crisis, but because we should celebrate the fact that we are now embarking on the third term of uninterrupted devolution in Northern Ireland? We had very successful Assembly elections—certainly as far as our party is concerned. A debate will allow us time to debunk the nonsense being spoken today by the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, about the peace process and the political process in Northern Ireland being under threat if we vote to leave the European Union. Surely that is the most irresponsible sort of talk that can be perpetuated in Northern Ireland. It is very dangerous and destabilising, and it should not be happening.

**Chris Grayling:** I pay tribute to all the political parties in Northern Ireland. The recent elections were characterised by being immensely dull, and that is a real tribute to the political progress that has been made in Northern Ireland. The fact that there was an election campaign based on detailed discussion about detailed issues—

**Mr Dodds:** And we won.

**Chris Grayling:** I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his success. He will agree that we should be immensely proud of having a routine election campaign about local issues without the controversies of the past. *[Interruption.]* The shadow Leader of the House cannot shut up and cannot recognise the progress that has been made in Northern Ireland, and I commend everyone who has been involved in it.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. All this shouting from a sedentary position is very unstatesmanlike. It is not the sort of thing that I would ever have done.

**Chris White** (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): Child and adolescent mental health must be a priority for local health services and every local authority. May we have a debate on the extra measures that we can implement to ensure that the framework is effective in providing the necessary support for some of the most vulnerable in our society?

**Chris Grayling:** The Government can boast of a good record in this area. We are already implementing measures that will deliver additional childcare for very young children, which will give their parents the opportunity to get into the workplace and bring a sense of direction and purpose to their households. We are also bringing forward measures, which are about to be discussed in the other place, that will help tackle issues around the adoption system and the care system. We have a good message to tell about what we are doing, and I hope that every local authority up and down the country will give this issue the importance that my hon. Friend rightly says it should have.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for the news that there will be a Backbench business day on Thursday 30 June. I also particularly welcome the half-day debate, on the previous day, Wednesday 29 June, on the 100th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme. I shall travel to the Somme on that day to join many members

of the Northumberland Fusiliers Association. The Northumberland Fusiliers were heavily involved in the first few days of the battle, with battalions such as the Tyneside Scottish, the Tyneside Irish and the Newcastle Commercial battalion being heavily involved on the front line as hostilities began on 1 July.

I also ask the House to note that the membership of the Backbench Business Committee has now been concluded. The details are in today's Order Paper. I welcome the new members, the hon. Members for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) and for Hazel Grove (William Wragg), to the Committee. I should also like to place on record my personal thanks to the hon. Members for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) and for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) for their service to the Committee and to the House over the past 12 months.

**Chris Grayling:** I echo the hon. Gentleman's thanks to my two hon. Friends. I wish all the new members of the Committee well, and I congratulate him on returning to his position as its Chairman. There will be many opportunities for Members to seek opportunities for debates from his Committee over the coming months, and I look forward to seeing the range of topics that they bring forward for debate. I also pay tribute to him and to all those who will be going to celebrate the anniversary of the Battle of the Somme. In fact, it is not a celebration; they will be going to mark that anniversary. People are absolutely right to say that we should do everything we can to prevent such a conflict from happening in Europe ever again, and we should particularly note the role played by the NATO alliance over the past 75 years, and the role that our American friends have played in that transatlantic alliance to help us to keep the peace in Europe. Long may that alliance continue.

**Mark Pritchard** (The Wrekin) (Con): We know that 76% of all suicides are men. The figure in this country is nearly 5,000 a year and those who are most affected are in the age group between 45 and 59. May we have a debate on what more local councils and local health authorities can do to reduce that alarming rate?

**Chris Grayling:** This is a subject of increasing importance. The rise in suicides among young men in particular is deeply alarming. The Secretary of State for Health takes this issue very seriously indeed and he is working on upgrading the national suicide prevention strategy. As a Government, we will do everything we can, and we are already putting additional resources into mental health treatments in the health service to try to tackle this and other problems. We are working immensely hard to tackle this.

**Mr David Winnick** (Walsall North) (Lab): In regard to parliamentary representation for women, it is worth remembering that in 1912 a future Labour Cabinet member, George Lansbury, resigned his London east end seat in protest against women being denied the right to vote and to be represented in the House of Commons. He subsequently fought a by-election, which unfortunately he did not win, although he came back to the House in due course. Does the Leader of the House agree that it would be useful to have a debate shortly on what is happening to women abroad? Yesterday, a 17-year-old woman in Pakistan was burnt to death by her family because they disagreed with her marriage, and it is said

that 1,000 women a year in Pakistan are murdered in the same way. Despite all the progress we have made in this country, the suffering that goes on and the murder of women should be remembered, fought over and debated, and we should try in every way possible to end it.

**Chris Grayling:** It is a great pleasure to find something on which the hon. Gentleman and I entirely agree. The treatment of women in some societies around the world is absolutely atrocious, and we as a leading nation in the world should always seek to improve that situation. We should use what influence we have around the world to change other regimes in other countries and to create a world that is more enlightened and more supportive towards women and that treats them in the way they should be treated.

**Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con):** May we have a debate on blood cancer? Next week, I am pleased to be starting the new all-party parliamentary group on blood cancer—Tuesday at 2 o'clock, room N, Portcullis House—and I would be grateful if the Leader of the House considered granting time for such a discussion.

**Chris Grayling:** I wish my hon. Friend well in establishing his new group. The great benefit of all-party groups is the strengthening of ties between this House and those outside who are affected by conditions such as blood cancer. It is an important part of the work of individual Members of Parliament, and I commend him for what he is doing.

**Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab):** When I was a Minister at the Department of Trade and Industry—now Business, Innovation and Skills—I was given a draft of an answer to a colleague's parliamentary question to sign off that said that they would have a full answer by the end of autumn. The Prime Minister's long-awaited decision on the Airports Commission is still awaited, but he said yesterday at PMQs that we would get a decision "in the summer". Can the Leader of the House clarify whether the September fortnight is part of the summer session or the autumn session?

**Chris Grayling:** Formally, summer will depend upon the weather, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that the decision will come shortly. We have taken time over the decision because, rightly, Members of the House and on the Opposition Front Bench—[*Interruption.*] We hear them chirruping yet again. They have asked us to take immense care over the issue of air pollution in the United Kingdom, so we have been careful to consider the impact of nitrous oxide emissions around Heathrow to ensure that we get the final decision between the two choices right.

**Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con):** The Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016 were dealt with under the negative resolution procedure. Despite the statutory instrument's provenance, much of it is commendable and will help in the fight against tobacco-related disease. However, may we have a debate on the paragraphs relating to e-cigarettes and vaping? ASH, Cancer Research UK, the Faculty of Public Health and the Royal College of Physicians are concerned that the paragraphs will be unhelpful in reducing the toll that tobacco takes.

**Chris Grayling:** I am very much aware of the issue that my hon. Friend raises. He is right that the measures have been carefully considered by the appropriate Committees of the House and have been debated and discussed in Brussels. I note his concerns and will ensure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health understands the concerns that exist on the Government Benches and were raised through the Standing Order No. 24 application yesterday by my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main).

**Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP):** We are now less than four weeks away from the publication of the Chilcot report and the former Prime Minister is back, haunting the television studios like some unwanted poltergeist, reassembling his old gang and getting his retaliation and excuses in first, all of which should give us some indication and encouragement that the report's verdict will be damning—he has of course seen it—as indeed it should be. What will the parliamentary response be? Will there be a statement on the day of the report's publication? Will the Opposition parties get sight of it under secure conditions? Will there be a debate in the following week? Will it be on the Adjournment? Will it be on a substantive motion? The Government have had a long, long time to think about this, and perhaps the Leader of the House can enlighten us on the parliamentary response to Chilcot.

**Chris Grayling:** Let me be clear that there will need to be discussions between the parties about exactly how we handle advance sight of the document, but it is of course essential that the House is able to question and discuss the report, even though it is not a Government report. I give the right hon. Gentleman the assurance that such opportunities will be provided.

As for the reappearance of the former Prime Minister in the media, it is noticeable that he has been omnipresent recently. The right hon. Gentleman might have noticed his interesting contribution today, in which he accused the current leader of the Labour party of changing it from a party of power into a party of protest, with which I, and probably even the shadow Leader of the House, agree.

**Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con):** Constituents of mine with relatives who have severe mental health problems often want to be close to them and to support them however they can, but are frustrated by the understandable confidentiality that mental health professionals must observe in relation to their patients. May we have a debate on how we can protect both patient confidentiality and the understandable desire of people to do their best for relatives who are suffering?

**Chris Grayling:** It is a really difficult issue and one that all of us have come across in our capacity as constituency Members. A relative who wants to do the right thing may or may not be doing the right thing, and professionals have to make difficult judgments about giving relatives access to information. It is an issue to which there is no right or wrong answer, but I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Health is aware that my hon. Friend has raised those concerns and he will perhaps respond to them directly.

**Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): May I remind the Leader of the House that on joining this House some of us took the Oath in both English and Welsh, so will he look again at the proposal to use Welsh in the Welsh Grand Committee? Some of us did not speak English until we were aged five. Most of us are now bilingual, but nevertheless the Welsh language and its status are very important.

**Chris Grayling:** I absolutely understand the need to protect the Welsh language, and across different Administrations over the last generation extensive steps have been taken to protect the Welsh language and make it part of routine life in Wales. My question to the right hon. Lady, however, is about whether, at a time of financial pressure, it is really sensible for us to be spending taxpayers' money in a House where the prime language, the main language, the official language is English and when we have Members of this House who talk in that language. As long as that is the case, although I have considered the matter carefully, I do not believe that we should change things.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): The Prime Minister has said that the EU budget has been cut, so I thought that I would check with the House of Commons Library. I do not think that these figures have been published, but according to the Library our net contribution to the European Union will increase by more than £2.7 billion this year—to £2,727,000. That does not seem to be a cut, so may we have a statement from the Government next week explaining the situation?

**Chris Grayling:** Fortunately, courtesy of the Opposition's debate choice next Wednesday my hon. Friend will have the opportunity to ask questions and make a speech about these issues in this Chamber. I have no doubt, given his assiduousness in these matters, that he will ensure that he does so.

**Mr Speaker:** Or even his assiduity.

**Keith Vaz** (Leicester East) (Lab): As the Leader of the House will know, this Sunday marks the start of Diabetes Awareness Week. Will he join me in congratulating Diabetes UK on this important campaign? Although 3 million people have been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, including me, 1 million people still do not know that they have diabetes. May we have a statement next week about the Government's response to Diabetes Awareness Week? Will the Leader of the House personally show his support—this has nothing to do with the excitement of the EU referendum campaign—and visit a pharmacy or GP in his constituency and have a diabetes test to encourage others to do so?

**Chris Grayling:** The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. This condition affects large numbers of people, as he rightly says, and there are people who are not aware that they suffer from diabetes. I will give him that assurance, although probably not over the next two weeks—there is quite a lot on. I will give him a commitment that I will have that test at some point over the next few weeks and months, because that would make an important point. We, as local Members of Parliament, could well follow his suggestion to raise awareness of diabetes in our constituencies.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement to be made urgently by the Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary about the Government's position on Turkish membership of the EU? In 2010, the Prime Minister said:

“I'm here to make the case for Turkey's membership of the EU. And to fight for it.”

In 2014, he said:

“In terms of Turkish membership of the EU, I very much support that.”

Last night, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who seems to be prepared to say anything at all to secure a remain vote, no matter how ludicrous, was saying that Turkey would never join the European Union. May we have an urgent statement to clear up this difference of opinion between the Chancellor and the Prime Minister and, in the meantime, will the Leader of the House confirm that it is still the Government's position that Turkey should be able to join the European Union and that British taxpayers' money is still being used to help Turkey's accession to the European Union?

**Chris Grayling:** I am sure that my hon. Friend's comments will have been noted by the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary and, of course, the Prime Minister will be back in this House next Wednesday before we go into recess. Notwithstanding questions about timing, it is still the Government's policy that in due course Turkey should join the European Union.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I was recently contacted by several constituents who were looking to purchase the freeholds of their properties, which were built a few years ago. My constituents had found that the developers who originally built the properties had sold the freeholds on to private investment companies, who were now asking for three or four times the original asking price to purchase those freeholds. I know there is a process to resolve these issues, but it is lengthy, complex and expensive, so may we please have a debate on what can be done to simplify that process and give people some comfort that the homes they have bought are not being used by third parties as part of some speculative investment strategy?

**Chris Grayling:** This issue obviously affects a great many people and, where there are set processes, it should not be possible for any freeholder to exploit an individual leaseholder by contravening the rules. The amounts payable are calculated according to a formula that is set down in law, and should not be exploitable. If the hon. Gentleman has identified cases where this is not happening and from which there are lessons to be learned, I ask him to write to me, and I will pass the matter on to my colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government and ask them to take a detailed look at the concerns he has identified.

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): May we please have a debate on how this House responds to the very diligent work of the European Scrutiny Committee? At a time when the nation is just two weeks away from taking the most important decision in a generation, it is inexplicable why there are no less than eight documents—

**Chris Bryant:** No fewer.

**Mr Nuttall:** There are no fewer than eight documents covering a range of important topics, such as free movement and the European Union charter of fundamental rights, all of which have been recommended by the European Scrutiny Committee for debate on the Floor of this House.

**Chris Grayling:** Mr Speaker, I have a proposal for the House. We know that the shadow Leader of the House is a champion of charities. May I suggest that we all sponsor him in a sponsored silence to raise funds for his chosen charities?

On the subject of European Scrutiny Committee timetables, of course there are opportunities in the next few days, particularly next Wednesday on the Opposition day, to debate many of those issues, but I do understand the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) makes. We sought in the previous Session to make more time available for debate, and I will ensure that we look again to see that we can do that in the coming Session.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May we please have a debate about the excellent work that charities, such as KIDS in Hull, do, working with children with disabilities and their families? They provide services commissioned by Hull City Council. I am really concerned that, given the cuts to local authorities, great charities like that are now finding that their funding is being cut or reduced and that services to the most vulnerable in our communities will disappear.

**Chris Grayling:** It is always a great disappointment when we hear about local authorities—all too often Labour authorities—that are not innovative enough when it comes to dealing with financial pressures. There are some great councils around the country that are dealing with those pressures in a thoughtful way, pooling resources with neighbours and avoiding the cuts to front-line services that the right hon. Lady describes. I would simply ask her to urge her local authority to look for those examples and ensure that best practice keeps those services in Hull.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): The Leader of the House has just confirmed that it is the policy of Her Majesty's Government to encourage Turkish accession to the European Union. Indeed, we are paying £170 million a year to help Turkey and four other applicant countries join. In the borough of Kettering there are about 5,000 migrants from eastern Europe, from a population of 72 million, 12 years after accession. Given that the population of Turkey is 76 million, that means that the people of Kettering face the very real prospect of having at least 5,000 Turkish migrants 10 or 12 years after Turkish accession—something that would transform the borough of Kettering. May we have an urgent statement from the appropriate Minister about why on earth we are spending £170 million a year on promoting this madness?

**Chris Grayling:** I know that my hon. Friend feels passionately about these issues and is making these points during the course of the campaign that he is part of. There will be an opportunity next week in this House to debate matters related to the European Union, and I am sure he will also take advantage of that opportunity to raise the issues he has brought up today.

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Constituents of mine in Motherwell and Wishaw have waited well over a year for a decision on their asylum applications. In that time, they have placed no financial burden on the UK. May we have a debate in Government time on the length of time still being taken to process and to make decisions on asylum applications?

**Chris Grayling:** Of course, it is not true to say that asylum seekers place no burden on the United Kingdom, because we do both provide accommodation for asylum seekers and support poor asylum seekers. That money comes from somewhere; it does not come from thin air.

We are all committed to seeking to get the fairest, speediest possible system for asylum in this country. We have a long tradition of being a refuge—a safe haven—for people escaping persecution, and that should always continue, but it is important that we do not allow our asylum system to become a veil for economic migration. They are different things and they should remain so.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Humberston Fitties is a unique community in the Cleethorpes constituency consisting of holiday homes. Yesterday North East Lincolnshire Council ruled that residents will be able to occupy their homes for only eight months of the year, rather than 10 months, as has been the case for many years previously. That is partly a result of guidance or rulings from the Environment Agency and other bodies. May we have a debate to clear up the confusion between what is guidance and what is a statutory instruction from such agencies to local authorities?

**Chris Grayling:** I sometimes wish local authorities would make that distinction. The intention is to give them options to pursue, rather than telling them exactly what they should do. Local circumstances vary around the country, and when the participation of residents of holiday homes is lost for part of the year, that can have an economic impact. My hon. Friend has made an important point and I hope his local authority will take a long, hard look at what it must do and what is right for its area, and not simply tick a box because it thinks it must.

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): A number of my constituents have suffered long delays in having their Disclosure and Barring Service applications processed, particularly where those have been processed via the Metropolitan police, and more than one has fallen into serious debt as a result of not being able to take up employment as a result. May we have a statement or a debate on how we can tackle this problem and resource the service properly?

**Chris Grayling:** I know that this problem crops up from time to time for all of us as Members of Parliament. I have had experiences similar to that of the hon. Gentleman. The Home Secretary and the Policing Minister will be here on Monday. The hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to put that question to them and ask what can be done to improve things.

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): My constituent Susan Fleeting contacted me regarding the tragic case of her son Robert, who died a non-combat death while serving in the

[Dr Lisa Cameron]

armed forces in an English military base. Mrs Fleeting, like many similar families affected, cannot gain closure as there is no automatic inquest by jury into Robert's death. Families require that we debate this important issue so that Mrs Fleeting, for her late son, and all armed forces personnel are assured of rigour and justice in the face of tragedy.

**Chris Grayling:** Of course, anyone who loses a child in unexplained circumstances should have information and should understand what happened. I will make sure that the Secretary of State for Defence is aware of the concerns that the hon. Lady has raised. She might like to write to me or to him giving more details. He will be here on the Monday after the referendum and I am sure he will be happy to take that question and give her a proper response.

**Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The pub code, which is designed to give some measure of protection to pub tenants against the sometimes appalling behaviour of pubcos, was meant to be implemented on 28 May, but so far the Government have put nothing before the House. When will the Government bring forward a statutory instrument so that we can get the code in place to protect tenants?

**Chris Grayling:** I believe the answer is very shortly, but I will write to the hon. Lady and give her more detailed information about what is planned.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I draw the attention of the Leader of the House to early-day motion 68.

[That this House notes that Kamuran Yuksek of the Democratic Regions Party was in the UK on 25 April 2016 addressing a meeting in the House of Commons at the launch of the trade union Freedom for Ocalan Campaign; further notes that he spoke eloquently on the need for a peaceful settlement to the Kurdish question and expressed similar views in the Kurdish media; notes that on the evening of 10 May 2016 Mr Yuksek was taken away by Turkish police following an arrest warrant by the Public Prosecutor in Diyarbakir, while his house and office were raided by the police; believes the motivation for Mr Yuksek's detention is purely political; notes that he is the latest in a long list of journalists, lawyers, trade unionists, politicians, academics and human rights defenders who have been incarcerated for having the temerity to criticise the authoritarian regime of President Erdogan who has unleashed a genocidal war against the Kurdish population; believes the behaviour of the Turkish authorities to be outrageous and unacceptable; and calls for the immediate release of Kamuran Yuksek.]

The motion demands the release of Kamuran Yuksek, the leader of the Democratic Regions party, who is currently incarcerated by the Turkish authorities. May we have a statement or a debate in Government time on the outrageous and unacceptable behaviour of the Turkish authorities towards the Kurdish population?

**Chris Grayling:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. All of us regard with some concern some of the recent developments in Turkey. As a Government we

urge the Turkish Administration to follow all the principles of democracy and fair justice in a democratic society. It is in their interests to do so, and if they aspire to join the European Union in future, whether we are in it or out of it, they will have to do that.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): I refer to early-day motion 155.

[That this House congratulates the BBC for a vivid and restrained account of the suffering of the loved ones of the British soldier Tom Keys who was killed in the Iraq War caused, in his father's opinion, by the lie of the threat from non-existent weapons of mass destruction; looks forward to the publication of the Chilcot Inquiry Report, but is concerned that attempts may be made to invent a fictionalised history of the reasons for the UK's involvement in the second Iraq War; and recalls a letter sent to Tony Blair by the hon. Member for Newport West in March 2003 which warned that the world would be a more dangerous place at the end of hostilities in Iraq than it was before, and that the UK's involvement in President Bush's Iraq War would deepen the sense of grievance among Muslims that the Western and Christian world seeks to oppress them and that this would provide a propaganda victory to Osama bin Laden that would increase his support and the likelihood of more acts of terrorism.]

When may we debate the motion about the Iraq war, a decision of this House that resulted in the deaths of 179 of our brave British soldiers, and the need for a new and swift inquiry—a parliamentary inquiry—into a decision of this House that resulted in the deaths of 438 of our courageous British soldiers? That was the decision in 2006 where only six of our soldiers had died in combat, and the decision was to go into Helmand province in the belief that not a shot would be fired. In the interests of informing our future conduct, is it not right that we set up that inquiry into the Helmand incursion as swiftly as possible and understand the consequences of that terrible decision?

**Chris Grayling:** The hon. Gentleman talks about separate inquiries, but we have the vehicles in this House for carrying out such inquiries; the job of Select Committees is to carry out precisely the kinds of investigations and lesson-learning that he has just described. It is always open to the Defence Committee, and indeed the Foreign Affairs Committee, to carry out such work if they so wish.

**Greg Mulholland** (Leeds North West) (LD): Further to the question from the vice-chair of the save the pub all-party group, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), having had a year to get the pubs code in place, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills then pulled it. Tenants are being denied a legal right that is laid down in the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015. BIS is refusing to give a date for when the code will finally come in, so may we have a statement on that? Can the statement also confirm that the code will apply retrospectively to the dates set down in legislation to ensure that those who are currently being denied their legal right get it?

**Chris Grayling:** As I said, I will get a proper response to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), and I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman is copied into



it. The Secretary of State will be here on the Tuesday after the referendum, when both hon. Members will have an opportunity to raise the matter.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Leader of the House and the Prime Minister have rightly condemned anti-Semitism, yet under our constitutional set-up a Prime Minister of Jewish or Catholic faith would be expressly forbidden from undertaking some of their duties, and the monarch still has to be of Anglican faith and is expressly forbidden from being of Catholic faith. Is the Leader of the House going to bring forward any plans to change these arrangements, or is he happy with a set-up that is effectively anti-Semitic and sectarian?

**Chris Grayling:** I hate to disappoint the hon. Gentleman, but disestablishment is not on the Government's agenda at the moment; there is quite a lot to deal with, and that is not top of our list.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): This week the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief released a report entitled, "Fleeing Persecution: Asylum Claims in the UK on Religious Freedom Grounds". It highlights the shortfall in the number of caseworkers who determine asylum applicants on religious grounds and outlines 10 points for improvement. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement on what steps the Home Office is planning to take to ensure that caseworkers are adequately trained to assess claims by individuals seeking asylum on religious grounds?

**Chris Grayling:** This is obviously a sensitive area, and we have to take great care with it. Of course we want to provide refuge to people fleeing religious persecution, but we need to ensure that our system is robust and that the people we are dealing with really are who they say they are. Great care is already taken to do that. The Home Secretary will be here on Monday, so if the hon. Gentleman has further thoughts about what we should be doing, I suggest that he raise them with her then.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I draw the Leader of the House's attention to early-day motion 175, which I tabled yesterday to mark the fourth anniversary of the Istanbul convention on preventing violence against women and girls.

*[That this House notes that 8 June 2016 marks the fourth anniversary of the UK Government becoming a signatory to the Istanbul Convention on violence against women and girls; expresses disappointment that the Government, despite outlining their commitment to do so several times, has still failed to ratify this important convention; recognises that women still face a significant amount of inequality, with one in four women experiencing some form of domestic, sexual or psychological abuse during their lifetimes; further notes that ratifying the Istanbul Convention should ensure that a series of preventative policies will be introduced to help tackle and end violence against women, such as non-violent conflict resolution in relationships and the right to personal integrity being included in school curricula at all levels; congratulates the campaign group ICchange for their continuing work in applying pressure on the Government to ratify the convention; and calls on the Government to accede to this pressure and ensure ratification as soon as possible.]*

I have sought debates on the matter through the Table Office, but with no joy. May we therefore have a debate in Government time to get to the bottom of why the Government have failed to ratify this important convention?

**Chris Grayling:** The hon. Gentleman has a number of different options for pursuing these issues, such as Adjournment debates or the Backbench Business Committee. I am sure that the Chair of the Committee, who is in the Chamber, has listened carefully to what the hon. Gentleman has said. If other Members share his concern, I am sure that the Committee will consider that possibility.

## EU Referendum: Voter Registration

11.43 am

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr Oliver Letwin):** I beg to move,

That the draft European Union Referendum (Voter Registration) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 8 June, be approved.

It will probably help the House if I restrict my remarks simply to explaining the nature of this statutory instrument, as the issues it raises will no doubt be debated in the ensuing discussion. The House will already be aware that on Tuesday night, between 9pm and 10pm, there was a huge surge of applications for registration—three times as many in one hour as have ever been experienced—and that, as a consequence, the website crashed at around 10 o'clock. Therefore, there were two hours during which it was lawful to apply to register in time to vote at the referendum, but people were denied that opportunity. The House will also be aware that it is the Government's intention, following the strong cross-party support and the Electoral Commission's approval, to introduce legislation to enable people to apply for registration up to midnight tonight and, if they are registered, to vote in the referendum. I want to explain to the House how the statutory instrument will achieve that.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** I am listening to my right hon. Friend with great interest. He says that the website was down for two hours. What was the hourly rate of applications, and therefore what is his official estimate of the number of people who wanted to register in that timeframe but were unable to do so?

**Mr Letwin:** My hon. Friend asks a very good question. Unfortunately, I can give him only a very partial answer. We know as a fact that there were, if memory serves, 214,000 applications in the hour leading up to the crash. What we cannot know, because it is in the nature of the computer system that it cannot tell us, is how many people either tried or would have tried to apply during the succeeding 90 minutes or so during which they were unable to apply. The answer is therefore that I cannot tell.

**Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con):** Have the Government made any inquiries, assessment or technical analysis of whether there is any possibility that some malevolent attack was made on the website at that time, as opposed to there being an incredibly unusual spike in the numbers?

**Mr Letwin:** My hon. Friend will very much recognise that I am not a technical expert on computing, but I am advised by those in the Cabinet Office and the Government Digital Service that, as far as they can make out, there was no untoward event whatsoever. There was simply an incapacity of the system to handle that number of applications. The system is designed to be scoped to deal with a certain number of simultaneous events, and that number was exceeded during that period, so in retrospect, it was not surprising that it fell over. I should add that since that time, as the very first lesson learned, the website has been altered so that it has a larger

capacity—I think almost twice as much capacity—to be able to deal with a higher number of simultaneous events than previously.

**Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con):** I think the question that most people want answering is: what is the rationale for extending the period for voter registration by 48 hours, given that when the system crashed it deprived people of the opportunity to register for two hours? Why not 24 hours or 72 hours—why 48 hours?

**Mr Letwin:** That is another very good question that I am very happy to answer for my hon. Friend. If we had been able to work out more quickly how to bring forward legally watertight legislation—in two or three hours, rather than 24 hours—it would have been possible to introduce the statutory instrument yesterday, and it might then have been possible to have an extension for a 24-hour period. We are anxious that the legislation should not be in any way retrospective, and it therefore makes sense that it should apply from midnight tonight, after the time at which this House and the other place will, I hope, have passed the statutory instrument. In the meanwhile, we have of course been doing our utmost to promulgate the fact that people can apply to register during this period and will still be able to vote in the referendum, thereby correcting the error that occurred as a result of the crash.

**Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP):** The Minister is being very generous in giving way. The message did get out in Northern Ireland—the chief electoral officer for Northern Ireland promoted it, saying that people could still register beyond the deadline—only for a sudden reverse to take place later, so that it now does not apply to Northern Ireland. Why the shambles? What went on in terms of consultation with the chief electoral officer for Northern Ireland? Why are citizens in Northern Ireland being deprived of this extra opportunity? I know we do not have the digital system, but having been told that by the chief electoral officer and the Government, people had such an expectation. This is a UK-wide referendum, so why is there a difference?

**Mr Letwin:** I apologise to the right hon. Gentleman for the fact that the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland did indeed issue a statement of the kind he describes. I do not know quite why it was issued, but that body is of course independent of us. As I think he is entirely aware, discussions went on yesterday about whether this should or should not include Northern Ireland. The answer to his question is the answer that he himself indicated: there is not an online system in Northern Ireland, and therefore the thing we are correcting did not go wrong in Northern Ireland. He would need to discuss with my colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office whether it would have been sensible nevertheless to extend this, but their view was that it would not be.

**Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD):** One of the big bugbears in the issue of electoral registration is the fact that people have to register some distance away from the actual election date. I am very pleased that the Government have now found that it is possible to shorten that period. Is it their intention that there may also be a shorter period for future elections so as to give people more time to register in advance of them?

**Mr Letwin:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, my erstwhile coalition colleague, for asking that question. That is certainly a serious issue that we will need to take away and consider in coming weeks.

**Danny Kinahan** (South Antrim) (UUP) *rose*—

**Mr Letwin:** I will take one more intervention from Opposition Members and then, if they will forgive me, I will try to make some progress.

**Danny Kinahan:** I want to emphasise the same point as the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds). In future, can we look to having something whereby the whole of the United Kingdom is on the same digital system and everything works together, because then all the electorate will understand it?

**Mr Letwin:** I can certainly give the hon. Gentleman that comfort. Northern Ireland will shortly move to an online registration system, and it is clearly desirable that it should do so.

Let me briefly explain how this statutory instrument achieves the intended effect and avoids a problem that was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), the Chairman of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, when the matter was discussed yesterday. Our aim is to enable those who are applying to register up to midnight tonight to register to vote, if they are eligible, in the referendum on 23 June. That moves that date forward by 48 hours—two working days. The statutory instrument achieves that by taking an entire block of time, which used to elapse between midnight last Tuesday and midnight on 16 June, and moving it lock, stock and barrel, without changing any of the relationships within it, two working days forward. That is why, if Members look at the statutory instrument, they will see that it inserts in a whole series of pieces of legislation a date of 20 June, which would previously, either actually or in effect, have been 16 June. The reason why 16 June to 20 June is seen as two days rather than four is that the whole of our legislation is constructed around working days, and the Saturday and Sunday—18 and 19 June—are therefore excluded. So we have taken a block of time and moved it two working days forward. The net effect of that is twofold, and only twofold. First, it achieves the intended effect of ensuring that people can register to vote in the referendum if they do so by midnight tonight; and, secondly, it means that the registers will be published at the end of the process by midnight on 20 June rather than by midnight on Thursday 16 June. No harm to mankind arises from the delay in the register being published.

The reason the SI solves the problem that was very rightly and acutely raised by my hon. Friend the Chairman of the Select Committee is that we retain the full five-day period for objections to applications, and indeed all the other aspects of the process, inside that block of time, because those relativities are not altered. I think that that is what led to the question from the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) about whether we could do exactly the same thing in future now that we have discovered that it does not cause any harm at the end of the process.

**Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): I very much welcome the fact that we are allowing people ease of registering to vote; I think we all agree with that as democrats. On the checking of who is eligible to vote, with large numbers seeking to be on the electoral roll, I have had a number of reports in my constituency of EU nationals being sent postal voting papers, and last night somebody called me to say that their 17-year-old daughter had received voting papers. What sort of assistance will be provided to electoral services officers and returning officers to ensure that the vote is secure in that sense?

**Mr Letwin:** First, nothing that we are doing in any way affects any of that, because the blocks of time are unaffected and therefore all the processes have the same amount of time in which to take place as they would have done previously. Secondly, there has been, in a few cases, a problem with the issue of votes to people who were not eligible to vote. That problem has been inspected and cured. We need to make sure that in future elections it does not happen. Thirdly, I have no knowledge of what might have happened to someone who is 17. I am sure that if my hon. Friend takes that up with my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), the Minister with responsibility for constitutional affairs, the Minister will be delighted to look into it immediately.

**Dr Liam Fox** (North Somerset) (Con): My right hon. Friend says that the problem of ballot papers being issued to those who are not eligible to take part in this election has been identified and cured. Can he therefore give us an idea of the scale of the problem? How many of these wrong ballot papers were issued?

**Mr Letwin:** We believe it to have been around 5,000.<sup>1</sup>

**Dr Fox:** Nationally?

**Mr Letwin:** Nationally.

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that paper applications will also be considered even though they may have arrived in the post yesterday morning or this morning, in the same way as late applications made online will be considered?

**Mr Letwin:** The answer to that is yes. The way in which the system in Great Britain operates, unlike that in Northern Ireland, is that all the paper goes into the online system at a later stage. The whole thing here has been delayed by two days.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Letwin:** I will, and then I am going to finish my remarks.

**Jim Shannon:** There is a knock-on effect from the registration for postal votes. As we heard in the news this morning, some people have voted already in mainland UK, whereas others in Northern Ireland have not. A large number of Northern Irish supporters are going to the European finals—the indication is that it will be some 20,000 people—and their postal votes could arrive on any date between 9 and 16 June, which means that those people will be away when their postal votes arrive.

1. [Official Report, 15 June 2016, Vol. 611, c. 3MC.]

[Jim Shannon]

In the light of what my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) has said, there seems to be a bit of chaos in the system. What discussions has the Minister had with the chief electoral officer for Northern Ireland to clarify those matters, get them sorted out and ensure that people who want to vote can vote?

**Mr Letwin:** There are two separate issues here. There is the question whether this statutory instrument has any effect on postal voting deadlines, and the answer to that is no, none whatsoever. They remain entirely intact. If there are people in Great Britain who are now able to register but who cannot get postal votes, they can take proxy votes instead. The deadline for proxy votes has not yet evaporated; it will be reached on 15 June, if memory serves. I have not had direct discussions with the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland about the specific issues that the hon. Gentleman raises, and I suggest that he take them up with my colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office.

I am conscious of the fact that I am using up time that needs to be used by the House for debate, so I will close by saying simply this. We have, of course, taken advice from our own lawyers—I had extensive discussions with the most senior figures in the Government legal service over a number of hours, as the House might imagine, yesterday—and from not only the Electoral Commission but, through it, its lawyers. We are absolutely convinced that we can do this by statutory instrument within the powers given us under the statutes, and that therefore this is a legally watertight measure. I hope that it will command the support of this House and the House of Lords in time for it to become effective before midnight tonight.

11.58 am

**Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): We welcome this statutory instrument, and I am glad that there has been extensive consultation, particularly with the Electoral Commission. The day before yesterday, more than half a million people successfully completed their application to be on the electoral register. That was a record, and all of us who believe passionately in democracy were truly delighted. But at its peak, the website was dealing with far more applications than at the previous peak, which was just before last year's general election. There has been understandable concern, on both sides of the House, about the fact that the online registration system was unable to cope with the demand before the close of registration the night before last. At an appropriate time, there will need to be an examination of how that could have happened, especially as there is likely to be increased digitisation of the process for conducting elections in future.

While many of those who applied to register after 10.15 pm were successful, sadly many were not. The result was that many people who wanted to register so that they could exercise their democratic right to vote were unable to do so. That was a negation of democracy and we are right to give those people the opportunity to exercise their democratic right to vote.

I have three specific questions for the Minister. First, does the statutory instrument alter the provisions relating to postal vote applications? He touched on that, but I

would like him to say a little bit more. Of course, voters with postal votes are able to cast their votes not just before the referendum day, but on the day itself by delivering them to the polling station. Secondly, what provision are the Government making for proxy vote applications, or will the situation stay as it is?

My third question relates to the extra financial burden that could well fall on certain local authorities. The Minister for the Cabinet Office made reference to extra resources being made available, but I wonder whether the Minister before us can be more specific about how those resources can be applied for, whether there will be a ceiling on those resources and if there is any estimate of what the overall additional cost might be to the Government.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): Does the Labour party agree with me that it is very important that the will of Parliament on whether people from the continent of Europe can vote in the referendum is enforced? It is the clear will of Parliament and most British people that they should not vote. Does the hon. Gentleman have any independent intelligence on how many of them have wrongly been sent polling cards?

**Wayne David:** I certainly agree that the rules should be adhered to, and I am reassured by the Government's assurance that that will be the case. However, it would be wrong to exaggerate this issue and make any kind of political point out of it.

As I said, the statutory instrument has our full support because it will enable those people who feared that they had been disfranchised to cast their vote on 23 June. I sincerely hope that those voters do precisely that. I urge the Government to publicise as widely as possible the fact that this facility is available. I urge them to consider new means of advertising it, such as having an advert on Facebook.

I said a moment ago that the statutory instrument has the support of both sides of the House, but I am disappointed that some in the leave campaign have criticised it. It is said by some that the statutory instrument is disproportionate. Others in the Vote Leave campaign have even suggested that the registration site was crashed deliberately to provide an excuse for extending the registration period. That really is absolute nonsense. It is equally nonsensical to suggest that the statutory instrument is somehow unconstitutional. That is clearly not the case.

The Opposition believe that every single person who is entitled to be on the register and who has made a valid application should be able to cast their vote. Of course, how people cast their vote is up to them—that is what democracy is all about.

**Valerie Vaz** (Walsall South) (Lab): Is it not the case that students who are registering at this time may have been preoccupied with exams and graduation? Is it not wholly reasonable, therefore, if the system has crashed, for the Government to do something about it and extend the time for registration?

**Wayne David:** Yes, that is entirely reasonable. We could cite many examples of people the length and breadth of the country, particularly young people, who for reasons like those that my hon. Friend has given

have not found time or had the inclination to register to vote. I am heartened that although many people say that the vote has not engendered a great deal of interest so far, the referendum has certainly excited a great deal of interest among young people. The indication is that many of the people who have applied quite late are young people who want to exercise their democratic right.

**Mr Hollobone:** It is obviously good news that the referendum is generating excitement among people of all ages who want to take part in the ballot. However, many students are doubly registered, at their home address and at their place of learning. So that those people do not get into trouble, should it not be made clear that even if they are legitimately registered twice, they cannot vote twice? Should that not be explained, especially to those who are voting for the first time?

**Wayne David:** I think that most people realise that it is one person, one vote. That is a fundamental, core principle of our democracy.

**Valerie Vaz:** With the change to individual registration, that has not been possible. The figures show that a million young people have fallen off the register, so it is not a case of registering twice; it is a case of not registering at all.

**Wayne David:** I do not want to go into detail about individual electoral registration. We have expressed our concerns about the process in the past, and I welcome the fact that more and more people want to be on the electoral register and thereby have the ability to vote. It is good for democracy that young people in particular want to be involved in our democratic debate and will cast their vote on 23 June.

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): Would not someone have to be a time traveller to vote twice, in their university seat and also at home? The idea that people would go to such lengths is ridiculous.

**Wayne David:** I reiterate that it is important for us to say categorically what most people realise: in our democracy, if one person has a vote, they should use it on one occasion on polling day. That is abundantly clear.

All who are engaged in the debate hold strong views, but it is vital for democracy that people have the right to cast their vote on 23 June. I therefore warmly welcome the Government's initiative. It is unfortunate that we have had a technical mishap, but action has been taken. I urge people throughout the length and breadth of this country to take advantage of the opportunity to register to vote and to cast their vote, whichever way they wish to do that, on 23 June. The decision is the most important that this country will make in a generation, and it is therefore vital that everyone who is entitled to vote casts their vote.

12.7 pm

**Dr Liam Fox** (North Somerset) (Con): Most of us, from whatever side of the argument, accept that the greater the number of voters who take part in the referendum, the better, because a high turnout, with more voters participating, gives the result added legitimacy.

The hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) is right that student preoccupations are many and diverse. They do not always involve study or graduation—certainly in my experience. However, perhaps one of the lessons for the future is that leaving registration until the last two hours possible may not be the wisest thing to do. Perhaps those who follow these proceedings will in future decide to register in plenty of time if they want to have their vote.

The sad tale of Government, the public sector and IT continues. This is yet another chapter in it. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said that, given the demand on the system, it was unsurprising that it crashed. I am very surprised that it crashed, so I would like to know one or two things. First, how much load testing was done? Why did not we anticipate that, when people realised that the referendum was getting closer, they would want to register? Why was sufficient provision not made in the system to allow for a spike in demand? That happened before the general election—it is not unprecedented. Why did the Electoral Commission not make sufficient arrangements to determine whether its system could cope with the demand? How do we know that it will not happen again? If we have another deadline tonight, how do we know that the system will not crash in exactly the same way?

**Mr Letwin:** It might help if I answer that point now. A massive amount of load testing was done, and the system was tested with the assumption that we would not face anything like the extent of the difference between what had been experienced previously—for example, at the general election—and now. This spike was three times as intense as the one that occurred before the general election. For today and yesterday the system has been made twice as capacious as it was previously, and we would now have to have about six times as many applications as were made at the general election before the system crashed again. I profoundly hope that that will not happen.

**Dr Fox:** We also hope that such a crash will not happen again.

I would be grateful if my right hon. Friend provided further information either today, or to the House in due course. First, how many of these are duplicate applications? There is clearly a problem, and a lot of voters believe from the literature provided by the Electoral Commission that registering for the referendum is different from registering for the general election or any other election. A lot of voters have said to me, "I'm registered for the general election. Do I have to register separately for the referendum?" The information given by the Electoral Commission was less than clear, and I wonder how many of the applications are in fact duplicates from people who are mistakenly asking whether they are already registered.

**Mr Letwin:** My right hon. Friend is asking pertinent questions, and it will be useful to have them answered for the rest of the debate. We do not and cannot know how many applications are duplicates, because until they have been verified we do not know whether those people were already on the register. Anecdotally, we think that a large proportion of applications may be

[Mr Letwin]

duplicates, but we will know that in aggregate only once we see the published register and compare it with previous registers.

**Dr Fox:** An important lesson will be to see whether a larger number of people register for the referendum than for the general election. If it is a much larger number, it suggests that the clarity and instruction given by the Electoral Commission had a good deal missing, which would be an interesting lesson for us all. On the competence of the Electoral Commission, let me return to the point that I raised earlier about ballot papers being sent to those who are not entitled to vote in the referendum. I am pleased that my right hon. Friend said that issue was identified and cured, and I wonder whether in due course a list can be published of those local authorities that say they had no problem, and of those that did have a problem, so that we can see exactly where the problem occurred across the country and its extent. I would be interested to know whether for some of those local authorities that said they had no problem that genuinely turned out to be the case, or whether it was an estimate about whether there was a problem or not. If the issue is so difficult to identify, it is difficult to believe that people can be so sure that they did not make mistakes in sending out those ballot papers.

I totally accept that this is a legally watertight mechanism, but to legislate for an electoral process during the election itself is not a precedent with which I feel entirely comfortable. I understand the emergency nature of this legislation, and I want as many people to participate as possible. I understand why the crash happened in terms of the technology, but I do not find it easy to agree to in effect changing the rules of any part of an election during the electoral process. We must be careful to state that this is an emergency procedure, and that we are not in any way accepting a precedent for Governments of the future to introduce changes to the rules while the game is in play.

12.14 pm

**Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): The Scottish National party welcomes the extension to registration. Our right to vote is precious, and we all bear responsibility for giving people that right, so I thank the Minister for coming to the House today. I also agree with the comments made by the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), who said that we would rather avoid legislating for an election during an election period, but we are where we are.

It is essential that everyone who wishes to register is able to do so, and the SNP will back the Government today on extending the registration window. This is a critical vote, and Members across the House with different views recognise the importance of this referendum. It will affect future generations, and it will have a much more substantial impact on younger voters, who will have to live with the decision that we make in two weeks' time, than it will on older voters. We are on the final straight; there are two weeks until the referendum. Will the Minister assure us that there will be a post-match analysis, so that we can consider what lessons we can learn from what happened over the past 48 hours?

**Mr Hollobone:** I am listening to the hon. Gentleman with great interest, and I agree that there should be a post-match analysis. Does he share my concern that that analysis will be conducted by the Electoral Commission, which will be writing a report about itself? Should there not be some kind of independent analysis? Otherwise, the report will automatically be skewed.

**Stephen Gethins:** Of course the Electoral Commission should look into this matter; we should always consider how we can improve our democracy. I hope that the Government will also look into this issue, given that they bear the burden of responsibility for it.

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): It is important that there is a steward's inquiry at a later date into what happened. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must also consider the effect that moving to individual electoral registration has had on this issue? Every time the register is compiled, there is a surge of new people joining it for the first time; this year, I fear that we may have had the additional burden of a lot of people who were previously on the register checking to see whether they are still on it, or realising that they are not, and that has created a big spike in demand.

**Stephen Gethins:** My hon. Friend raises a good point about people double-checking. I double-checked myself, and I encouraged others to do so, so I wonder whether the Government will consider that.

I also ask the Government to consider what lessons can be learned from Scotland. During the independence referendum, voter registration was at 98%, and everybody involved in that process should rightly be proud of themselves. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) has also reflected on that. Having had 98% registration, we had an 85% turnout in the referendum, with huge voter participation on both sides, and we should learn from that. I hope that we will reach a turnout of 85%, or even higher, in the referendum, as I am sure that colleagues across the House do, although I am not sure we will quite get there.

**Danny Kinahan:** I wonder how much of that increase was due to lowering the voting age, and giving younger people who are at school the chance to take an interest.

**Stephen Gethins:** The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. If, as has been suggested, younger voters are the ones registering, I encourage that, and perhaps we should consider giving 16 and 17-year-olds the vote. Evidence shows that the younger a person engages in the political and democratic process, the more likely they are to be engaged in the long term, so I hope we can reflect on that.

**Mark Tami** (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes important points, but we should not forget that an estimated 7 million people are not even on the register in the first place. We should not lose sight of that, or of what we need to do to get those people to register.

**Stephen Gethins:** The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point that ties into the one raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard). My hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson)

and other SNP Members have wondered whether we should start looking at automatic registration. We want to encourage people to register, and we do not want this problem in future. Automatic registration works in other countries, and it can be a better and cheaper system. Will the Minister commit to considering automatic registration when he conducts that post-match analysis? In conclusion, the SNP welcomes the extension to the registration period, and we encourage as many people as possible to take part in the important decision in two weeks.

12.19 pm

**Chloe Smith** (Norwich North) (Con): Like other right hon. and hon. Members, I shall keep my comments brief. The statutory instrument is a sensible and proportionate measure that is in no way harmful to decent process, as the Minister sensibly set out. It simply picks up and shifts the period, which is a measured way of dealing with this unfortunate problem. I do not like it that the problem has arisen. I was the Minister who introduced online registration, an innovation of which I am very proud, and I wish the system well; we all want to see it functioning properly.

Let us not forget what the alternative to taking this measure would be. It would be to allow an unlawful situation to have persisted from Tuesday night, whereby people with the right to register to vote were denied the ability to do so—and an arbitrary situation also, given that, because of the nature of queuing on a website, it would not be possible to be even-handed towards citizens. It would be deeply ethically wrong to allow such a situation to persist, so we have no alternative but to take this measure.

There is another reason. None of us should accept poor service from the Government towards their citizens—those citizens ought to be the Government's master—so I greatly respect the ministerial team for their efforts to ensure that public services, digital as well as paper-based, work better for citizens. That is very important.

**Wayne David:** Does the hon. Lady think it a fair point that the upsurge and crash occurred after the big debate between the Prime Minister and Nigel Farage? Might not the Government have anticipated a surge of interest at that point?

**Chloe Smith:** The Government have answered that point for themselves many times yesterday and this morning, but I think it was a foreseeable circumstance, what with the TV scheduling and the availability of online registration. I am, however, reassured by what I have heard today about a further multiplication of capacity. It is the right response. As I have said, retrospectively allowing for a further 48 hours—we hope that gets the message out—is a sensible solution.

I offer one more practical thought. If would-be registrants got as far as leaving their contact details on the site before it failed, it might be possible for them to be contacted directly in the remaining hours. I offer that as a suggestion. I know that it will not cover everyone who tried to register on Tuesday night, but it might be possible in some cases, and it would be a sensible thing to attempt, in order to avoid an unlawful or arbitrary loss of those citizens' rights.

I end with a point that *The Economist* made last week, in reference to American politics:

“Any political party that hopes for lower turnout has lost its way...lawmakers must decide whether they still believe in the good sense of those they aspire to govern, or whether they lost that faith somewhere on the way to the statehouse.”

That should be the principle in all our hearts, both in this referendum and, crucially, as we go about politics from hereon in.

12.23 pm

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I am pleased, if not astounded, by the speed at which the Government have moved on this issue. I am grateful for that, and for the Minister's clear explanation of the reason for the statutory instrument and its purpose. Given that this is the biggest decision for a generation, I believe, like others, that it is essential that as many electors as possible can take part. This is not a general election; it cannot be rerun in five years.

As others mentioned yesterday, there are major implications for the Boundary Commission, so I would like to ask the Minister a very specific question: will there be discussions with the commission as a result of what has happened in the last 24 hours, given that it will clearly have a major impact, as many more constituencies will now have reached the appropriate number of electors?

**Chloe Smith:** I do not entirely follow the right hon. Gentleman's logic. If there is only a lift and drop of the same number of days in total, how will that affect the end result for the Boundary Commission?

**Tom Brake:** The point is that a large number of people not previously registered are registering, which will affect the number of electors in each constituency. This means that the commission is using figures that do not reflect the number of newly registered electors. That is why this is important.

I have a technical question for the Minister. Is it possible that some people who were in the middle of registering when the system crashed were left with the impression that they were registered, and will not find out otherwise until their ballot papers fail to arrive? If so, what is being done about it?

The Minister has rightly said that what happened has allowed us to identify that the final point in the process—the publication of the register—is not a critical point, and that publication could be brought closer to the date of the election. I wonder whether it would be possible to bring it closer still to the election date. If nothing needs to happen after publication, except for local authorities putting copies in the packs for polling stations, why not move it even closer to the date of the election?

Finally, as a result of what happened, there has clearly been some confusion among the electorate generally about whether it is still possible to register up to the end of today. Is there Government funding available that can be used today to ensure that the likes of Facebook and Twitter use the channels by which they can reach a mass audience instantly to make it clear to everybody that they can register until midnight tonight?

12.27 pm

**Mr Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I correct any misinterpretation? Everyone I know in the leave campaign—in Vote Leave, in particular—welcomes the enormous interest and surge in the number of people registering to take part in the referendum. It was clearly imperative that something be done, if possible, to address the anomaly that arose on Tuesday night. I welcome the fact that young people in particular are registering, and I absolutely take the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) that anybody in politics who thinks they will thrive on a lower turnout is not thriving in a democracy that we want to be part of.

There will be a time for an inquest, not just by the Electoral Commission or the Government, but by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. We have already pencilled in what we will do in the aftermath of the referendum, to see what lessons should be learned, and in the aftermath of the general election, individual registration and so on.

**John Redwood:** Is it not particularly important in the case of big national issues, such as whether we want an independent democracy in one country, that the electorate be the one chosen by Parliament? Does my hon. Friend share my concern that there is not proper control over continental Europeans registering and voting in the referendum?

**Mr Jenkin:** I was going to come to that later but will deal with it now. With individual registration, it is imperative that every new registration is cross-checked with national insurance data and, if necessary, Border Agency data. There is no post-registration audit of electoral registers, so anybody who is mis-registered stays on them. This needs to be looked at, because we have no idea how many non-UK EU nationals not from Malta, Cyprus or Ireland are recorded as eligible to vote and have been sent ballot papers, not because of a software glitch but simply because they were mis-registered, either on purpose or inadvertently. Indeed, one electoral returning officer told a member of the House of Commons Library—off the record—that if somebody lies on their registration form and it cannot be checked, nothing can be done about it. The person still has to be registered. There is no way of cross-checking to find out whether someone has lied.

**Mr Hollobone:** I am listening to my hon. Friend's remarks with great care. This is an issue for my constituents, who are really concerned about it. If an EU citizen in the borough of Kettering applies to be on the register but ticks the wrong box—either inadvertently or deliberately—and declares that they are a UK citizen, can that be picked up and the application rejected? I have not yet heard that there is a mechanism for doing that, and certainly not if there are to be 100,000 or hundreds of thousands in just a few hours.

**Mr Jenkin:** My hon. Friend raises a legitimate question, and we should inquire further into it. There should be a fail-safe way of ensuring that someone is who they say they are when they register their vote. At the moment, there is not. If people on the register now who are

registered incorrectly are being sent ballot papers, and if it is not due to a software glitch, there is no way of picking it up.

I have urged the Electoral Commission to make more public statements, because the system now has different franchises for different purposes. Why will there not be notices in polling stations? The electoral officer is bound to offer a ballot paper to someone who is on the register, but a “Read this” notice could make it clear that people who are not eligible to vote but who knowingly do so commit a criminal offence.

**Mr Kevan Jones:** I accept the point about people filling in the application form without declaring that they are an EU citizen, but if they are an EU citizen they will be marked up as such on the register at the polling station. If they were sent a polling card inadvertently, the clerk would know that they were not entitled to vote.

**Mr Jenkin:** Not if they were misrecorded—that is the point. We need to make people aware of who is eligible to vote. It would be perfectly reasonable for the Electoral Commission and the Government to make more visible public statements to make it clear that if someone has been offered a ballot paper but is not eligible to vote—and knows it—it is an offence to vote. It is as simple as that. I am not asking polling officers to discriminate when the vote takes place; I am simply asking for more clarification and greater public awareness of who is and is not eligible to vote.

**Mike Weir** (Angus) (SNP): This is not a new issue. The registers for the Scottish Parliament elections and the local government elections are different from that for the UK general election. We had elections for the Scottish Parliament about a year after the Westminster general election, but the problem highlighted by the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) did not arise—there was not a great deal of confusion. I suspect that the hon. Gentleman is making a mountain out of a molehill.

**Mr Jenkin:** If the wrong people are able to vote, it is not making a mountain out of a molehill. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would not want the wrong people to vote, so I am surprised that he does not want the public to have the information that they should have.

The matter before us should not have arisen. It reflects a lack of adaptation, because individual registration has enormously increased the pressure on systems to cope with the problem. The Government were warned by the Electoral Commission and the Public Administration Committee, as it then was, about the consequences of rushing forward with individual registration, however desirable it was. There was a lack of foresight. The Government agreed to spend millions of pounds on promoting registration in the run-up to this poll. Perhaps they should have used publicity to clarify that people did not have to re-register if they were already on the register. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) rightly noted, and as the Minister confirmed, a great number of people registered to vote in this referendum when they were already on the register—perhaps up to 75% of those applying. That is one reason why the system has become clogged up.



People have not clearly understood that if they are already on the register, they do not need to re-register. We need to learn from that.

Let us be clear about the consequences. A requirement to change the law when a poll for postal voters has effectively already opened is highly irregular. If this happened in some fledgling democracy in the former Soviet Union or in Africa, what would the observers say about the conduct of the poll? This is a really unpleasant precedent to set in our system, which should be one of the finest democracies in the world. The fact that Ministers have spent so much talking to lawyers underlines the point I made yesterday that this is on the cusp of legality. We are on the edge of what is acceptable. I do not for a moment believe that there will be a legitimate challenge, but the fact that we have to consult lawyers in such detail and so carefully to get this right underlines the pickle that we are in as a result of this lack of foresight and lack of care.

More pressure is being placed on electoral returning officers and electoral administrators. I have heard anecdotally from one authority that “we are near breaking-point”. There are record numbers of postal votes, record numbers of registrations, record numbers of proxies in a massive national poll, on which so much is hanging. The pressure is on them, and this adds to that pressure. We should be mindful of that, thank them for their incredible commitment, which makes our democracy run so smoothly most of the time and wish them well in their tasks.

I extend my best wishes, too, to the Electoral Commission. I and others have criticised it, but it is doing its best under very difficult circumstances. There may be lessons to learn about the future of the Electoral Commission and the future role of the Cabinet Office when we conduct our inquest into this referendum.

12.36 pm

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): I had thought it a unifying point in the debate that we wanted to get the maximum number of people to vote and to be registered in this campaign. What I have just heard from the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), however, is a typical muddying of the waters that we have seen from the leave campaign, even in respect of the facts that we are dealing with. The hon. Gentleman threw out a figure of 75%—I accept that some people will have re-registered without needing to do so—with no evidence to explain where that estimate came from. We must deal with facts.

We have seen in the press that huge numbers of people who are EU citizens and not entitled to vote have obtained voting cards. If they are getting voting cards, there will be an indication on the registrations that they are EU citizens. The register that officers will tick off will show whether people are EU citizens and unable to vote. This attempt to muddy the waters on the legitimacy of the polling is complete nonsense. Attempting to rubbish this referendum even before it starts and using the sort of highly emotive language that we just heard, suggesting that the electoral process would somehow be questionable for a developed state brings no credit to those arguing such a case and is not at all helpful.

I welcome what the Government have done. The upsurge in those wanting to vote in the referendum has been a problem, but we should celebrate it. It is good

that people want to vote in this very important referendum. Unlike with a general election, there is no possibility of a change in five years' time; this decision will guide the future of our nation for many decades to come.

It must be the first time I have ever agreed with a Liberal Democrat, but I agreed with the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) that we must subsequently have an inquiry into whether the increase in registration should be reflected by the Boundary Commission.

Let me knock on the head the nonsense we have heard about 17-year-olds voting. I have been an election agent and a candidate in many elections, and I have never known an election yet in which somebody has not been on the register who should not have been. It happens; it is human nature. If someone who is 17 has been given a poll card and turns up at the polling station, they will not be allowed to vote because their date of birth will appear next to their name. Let us try to clear away the fog that Members are trying to create by suggesting that the process is somehow illegitimate. I do not know whether they are preparing their excuses for the result post-23 June, but the fact is that long-standing mechanisms are in place.

May I ask the Minister one simple question about postal applications? He said that the deadline would be extended until midnight. Will there be any provision for a councillor or returning officer to obtain the applications from the post office before midnight? In most cases, the last post will be during the day, and we do not want large numbers of postal applications to sit in sorting offices if they could be delivered to the returning officer. Could the returning officer, or councillor, arrange with the post office to collect them later in the day? Even if they were collected at five o'clock, at least people would then be registered.

What has happened is unfortunate, but I must give credit to the Government for coming up with a solution. That brings me back to the main point, which is that we must ensure not only that as many people as possible are registered to vote, but that the turnout is as high as possible on 23 June.

12.41 pm

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): I think it is worth pointing out that the reason we are having a referendum at all is that the Conservatives won the last general election. All the Opposition Members who are celebrating this massive increase in registration should bear it in mind that none of this would have happened had they formed the Government following the election.

**Mr Kevan Jones:** Why?

**Mr Hollobone:** Because the Labour party would not have agreed to a referendum on our membership of the European Union, and we would therefore not have seen more than 2 million extra people registering. The Conservative victory means that we are a healthier democracy than we could ever have been if Labour had won the election.

**Mr Jones:** I have heard some tenuous links in my time, but that one takes the biscuit.

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) is a most assiduous Member of the House, and is also extremely particular about adherence to conventions and scope. I therefore do not encourage him to dilate further upon the point that he has just made. He has made it, but I know that he will now wish to focus on the instrument, and not beyond it.

**Mr Hollobone:** I am grateful for your wise counsel, Mr Speaker.

The instrument amends the European Union Referendum Act 2015, which specified what we all assumed at the time was the last possible date for registration. One of the worrying aspects of this revision is the fact that we are now being told that it will be possible to register two days after what the Government had told us would be the last possible date. I fear that the Government inadvertently misled the House. Surely, if the aim is to encourage more people to register, it is desirable to specify the last possible date, which is what we have now arrived at by means of the instrument. I urge the Government, when it comes to future elections, to ensure that “the last possible registration date” means precisely that.

I understand that the instrument does not change the postal vote application deadline. There will be instances in which people apply for postal votes without being on the electoral register, and assume that they will be given postal votes because they are registering today. My understanding is that they will not qualify for postal votes, because it is not possible to apply for a postal vote without being registered.

**Mr Letwin:** I am sorry to intervene, but I think it would be helpful for me to do so at this stage. My hon. Friend has asked a serious question, but what he has said is not accurate. I asked the same question myself, because it is a fine point.

It is not, in fact, necessary to be registered to apply for a postal vote, although it is obviously necessary to be registered in order to receive and exercise that vote. Those who applied for postal votes in time for the postal vote deadline, and are now able to register in time for the new registration deadline, will qualify for postal votes.

**Mr Hollobone:** I am most grateful for that clarification. We have ended up with the right result, even if it is the wrong way round.

I am concerned about an aspect of student voting, although I hope the Minister will tell me that I have got it wrong. It is great that so many young people are signing up to take part in the referendum, and of course many participants on both sides will be very enthusiastic. First-time voters, in particular, may not appreciate a fairly simple point that many other voters do appreciate, which is that even if people are registered twice, they cannot vote twice. There is a serious point to be made here. My understanding is that voting twice is a criminal offence, and that it is the police who investigate it. I think it would be a great shame if students ended up being investigated by the police because, in their enthusiasm and naivety, they voted twice.

**Mr Kevan Jones:** It is, again, trying to confuse the situation to say that that will create a problem. How could someone who was registered in Durham—other

than by means of a postal vote: I must say that before the hon. Gentleman comes back at me with it—vote in two places on the same date? That is not possible.

There is another point which the hon. Gentleman and other Members have missed completely. When people walk into a polling station, they see a long list of dos and don'ts, and the don'ts include voting twice.

**Mr Hollobone:** There is a long list of dos and don'ts, but no one reads it, because the type is so small and the notice is so big. It looks like what it is, a load of legalese about the correct procedures. The hon. Gentleman is an experienced Member of the House and an experienced politician, and he knows about democratic procedures. The serious point that I am making—not from a vote leave standpoint, or indeed from a remain standpoint—is that there will be hundreds of thousands of first-time voters who do not understand registration, and because they realise that they can register at the last minute, they have done so. What I want to avoid is police investigations afterwards because students have made a silly mistake.

**Mr Jones:** The hon. Gentleman has no evidence whatsoever that this will be a big problem. He is obviously trying to get a headline into tomorrow's *Daily Mail*. As an experienced candidate and an experienced election agent, I can tell him that anyone who is unclear about the rules can always ask the poll clerks, who will explain the process of voting.

**Mr Hollobone:** I am sure that no students in Durham will be affected by this potential anomaly.

**Stephen Gethins:** I am not sure what the hon. Gentleman is saying about the quality of the universities that he knows, or about how fast their battle buses must be to take them from one place to another, but will he at least accept that we should be encouraging students and young people to become involved as a point of principle?

**Mr Hollobone:** I have already said that twice, but I am happy to say it again. I think it is great that we are seeing loads more people signing up to the electoral register, especially young people. If it were up to the hon. Gentleman's party, or the other party, we would not be seeing that at all.

The instrument makes it clear that there will be a post-match analysis, and that the Electoral Commission will have to produce a report on the conduct of the referendum. This is a serious point: the Electoral Commission will be writing a report about what the Electoral Commission has done in the referendum. Now, that is fine—that is one piece of evidence—but there is no provision in the statute for another investigation to be conducted.

This is a matter for my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin). I think that, whatever the result of the referendum, it will be an urgent priority for his Committee to initiate an investigation of not just this matter, but the way in which the system has worked in general. I understand that there are issues involving the electoral arrangements as a whole—not just registration, but the way in which the referendum is being handled—owing to the scale of the challenge confronting registration officers, and those who conduct

the referendum itself. I urge my hon. Friend and his Committee to begin that work as soon as possible after the referendum. The Minister helpfully said that there were 214,000 applications to register in the hour before the crash. I think I am right in saying that the down time of the crash was one hour and a quarter.

**Mr Letwin:** It was one hour and three quarters.

**Mr Hollobone:** Right. None of us knows, but it would be reasonable to assume that about 400,000 possible registrants were not able to register. To make up for this down time—I am not saying that this is wrong; I am just pointing it out—we are effectively extending the registration period for two days. It is very important that Her Majesty's Government publish the number of registrants in that two-day period. Effectively, they are stopping the registration clock as of midnight two days ago, and they will publish the numbers of applicants for the two preceding days.

**Mr Letwin:** It may help the House and my hon. Friend if I say that, according to my latest information, there were 242 applications yesterday, which was the first of the two days to which he is referring. That is just over half the number he is talking about across the two days.

**Mr Hollobone:** I am grateful for that. It is great to have the latest information here in the House.

I close on this point—I keep reiterating it, but, as usual, the Government do not seem to listen—why do we not have the simple system whereby every time a member of the public is in contact with a Government agency of some sort, whether it be a local authority or the benefits department, they are asked the question by a Government official, “Are you on your local electoral register. This is how you apply, and we encourage you to do so.” I do not see why that should be difficult for the Government to organise across Departments, and it would help to minimise the scale of this problem in future.

12.51 pm

**Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I will try to be brief, Mr Speaker.

Whatever we think of the problems that this country has with its relationship with Europe, we certainly have problems with disfranchisement, disengagement and disbelief in the values of what we do in this place and with politics in general. I welcome the fact that we have seen huge numbers of people registering in this process, and the fact that we have extended that process for two days. As the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) said, it demonstrates that we could extend the period for voter registration to closer to the date of an election or a referendum. We now have a very good precedent for doing so. For my money, I would also look seriously at 16 and 17 year olds voting, and at compulsory voting. The serious point that I seek to make is that for those of us who favour in principle the idea of online voting, this exercise has demonstrated quite how perilous that transition could be.

**Tom Brake:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman on the issue of voting at the age of 16 and 17. I also agree that it is time for the Government to initiate trials in relation to online voting.

**Matt Warman:** The right hon. Gentleman read my mind.

Although there are many Members across the House who think that online voting is inevitable, it is crucial that, in a world where we cannot get voting in person right in some parts of the country in the 21st century, we conduct sensible small-scale trials of online voting.

**Mr Kevan Jones:** Does the hon. Gentleman recall that in 2004 the Labour Government did a trial of all postal voting, e-voting and other things. It was commended by the Electoral Commission. It was his party and others who argued that fraud could be endemic, and that was why the trial was not taken any further.

**Matt Warman:** I agree that trials have taken place and that they were a good thing, but they did also demonstrate that the system was not perfect. I do not think that anyone who looked at those trials, which were 12 years ago and which did not use the technology that we would now use, would say that they should have been rolled out across the whole country, because they were not as robust as we would have liked them to be. None the less, it remains the case that online voting is inevitable given the direction in which this country is going. We should look carefully at what that means, but, given the experience of the past 24 to 48 hours, let us bear in mind that if we get things wrong, we risk not only further undermining people's faith in democracy, but putting ourselves in a position where even fewer people than now would vote, and that would be bad for all of us.

Although I welcome many of the things that we have seen over the past 24 to 48 hours, I urge the Government to seize the opportunity to extend the registration deadline closer to the period of an election or a referendum, to demonstrate the real appetite of people to use the web to get involved in democracy, and to begin those trials into online voting so that we can, over however many years it takes, get to a point where people can use the web to cast their vote and increase turnout overall.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That the draft European Union Referendum (Voter Registration) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 8 June, be approved.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I ask whether you have had any request or indication from a Minister or a Law Officer that it is their intention to come to the House today, or at any time, to make a statement regarding the announcement by the Crown Prosecution Service today that, having considered the case of UK security service personnel and possible involvement in extraordinary rendition of two families to Libya, it has decided not to take proceedings? The press notice issued by the CPS indicates that it has concluded that there is sufficient evidence to support the contention that the suspect had sought political authority for some of his actions. This is the first occasion on which we have had

[*Mr Alistair Carmichael*]

any indication that the Government of the day had any knowledge of what might or might not have been done. Surely this House should be told about that.

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his characteristic courtesy in giving me notice of his intention to raise it. The short answer is that I have received no approach from any Minister indicating a desire or intention to make a statement on this matter. Moreover, although a matter of huge interest to him and a great many other people in the House and beyond, it is of course not a matter for the Chair. However, he has put his point very forcefully on the record, and it has been heard by cerebral occupants of the Treasury Bench, and doubtless the thrust of what he has said will wing its way beyond this Chamber to other important persons. We will leave it there for now. I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for what we have just heard.

## Carers

12.58 pm

**Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con):** I beg to move, That this House has considered carers.

Imagine a day when 6.5 million people did not turn up to work as expected. They had a duvet day. They went to the beach. They subscribed to Netflix. They did some beauty therapy and some shopping therapy. They went drinking and they had fun—they might have taken a trip to the beach, or had a day at a theme park. What if those 6.5 million people made no arrangements for the care of their loved ones? What if those massive numbers of people simply took a holiday and did not arrange any cover? How many vulnerable people would go unattended and unfed? How many would be unable to get out of bed to go to the loo? There would be no pills, no jabs, no dressings administered and no GP appointments attended. There would be nobody caring for the people who cannot do it for themselves. How frightening, gravely concerning and inhumane would that be? How many people would die? How many people's conditions would deteriorate? How would our emergency services cope? Who would pick up the slack if those 6 million carers did not turn up for work one day?

In this country, 1.3 million provide more than 50 hours of unpaid care a week. The care they provide is worth £132 billion a year, which is what the NHS costs us. There are 150,000 doctors in the NHS and 87,000 soldiers in our Army. In Eastleigh, there are more than 10,000 carers, and the same number in Chippenham and Sedgfield. There are more than 8,000 in Stirling and more than 12,000 in North Antrim. An army of carers turns up every day—day in, day out.

**Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con):** I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. She is right to highlight the financial value of carers. Does she agree that the personal value should also be considered? According to Carers UK, three out of four carers feel that their role is not understood in their community. Does she agree that community support is vital in helping to build carer-friendly communities?

**Mims Davies:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and I am delighted to have secured this debate today to highlight these issues. I know that she works tirelessly in her community to support carers and the people who need them. I agree that there is a human cost and an economic cost to caring.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for being so supportive in ensuring that this important topic gets time in the Chamber. I hope that this will be a wide-ranging debate. I am also grateful to the Government and to the Minister for Community and Social Care, who has been very supportive of my application to hold the debate this week, which is carers week.

We know the value of carers, but do we really understand what is involved? How do you become a carer? A loved one might get older or become disabled. A child might be born with challenges. Someone might experience an unexpected change in their health. There might be a car accident or an incident at work. An operation could

go wrong. A mental health challenge could arise, resulting in the need for care. All of a sudden, you become someone who needs to be a carer. How do you manage it?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) has suggested, long-term caring can have a financial and emotional effect on families. It can have an impact on relationships. You lose friends. You lose leisure time. You also lose your freedom. Relationships between husbands and wives change. You become a carer rather than a lover or a friend. The impact of the need for mum or dad or a child to come first means a big change for families. You can develop a fear of the phone. You could be at work, out shopping, doing the chores or walking the dog when you get a phone call to say that something has happened on your caring watch. It is worrying for you as a carer when the phone rings. You are mindful of what damage could be done while you are not there.

Carers week represents an important collaboration by Carers UK, Age UK, the Carers Trust, Independent Age, Macmillan Cancer Support, the Motor Neurone Disease Association and the MS Society. The focus this year is on building carer-friendly communities, and that is why I have tried in my opening remarks to remind people that someone in their lives is taking on the extra responsibility of being a carer. How many hidden carers do Members have in their constituency? Who do we know who is taking on that role? This debate gives us a chance to highlight the need to ensure that all our communities are aware of the work that unpaid carers do. Local GPs should understand the restraints a carer might face—I am aware that GPs themselves face many pressures—and employers should be spearheading flexible working and educating their own organisations to support carers.

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this vital debate. Does she agree that some of the hidden carers are young people aged 12, 13 or 14? I have met some of them from Staffordshire and they do the most amazing work. They need our support.

**Mims Davies**: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I shall go on to discuss the importance of young carers in a moment. More than 700,000 of the 6 million carers in this country are young carers who are taking on at a tender age all the burdens that I have described. This has an impact on their education and their opportunities. Our schools should show understanding and foster an environment in which young people can be carers. They should forge an appreciation of caring in our ageing society. Three in every four carers do not feel that their caring role is understood or valued by their community. It is incredible that we have so much more progress to make before we can live in a truly carer-friendly Britain. I believe that we are now at the start.

As I have said, more than 6 million people in England provide unpaid care, with 1.3 million providing more than 50 hours a week. In my constituency, there are more than 10,000 unpaid carers. We have an army of carers quietly working away looking after their loved ones across this country, and they do it for humane reasons. We do not do enough to support and recognise them. Locally, the loss of respite has been a great cause for concern. Respite offers carers freedom and time to

regroup, and a lack of it can be a great concern. Alternatively, the wrong type of respite might be offered or it might be poorly managed. I have heard about such experiences in my constituency surgery feedback.

I thank the volunteers in my constituency who support our carers. The One Community brings together many groups to support each other, including the Age Concern centre, Dementia Friends, the Alzheimer's group and all the people who help carers by driving their loved ones to hospital or to the GP.

I also want to say thank you to everyone in my constituency who runs a lunch club or a social club, all of which provide important opportunities for social contact.

A recent Carers UK report highlighted the fact that many carers are struggling. Most of us will have to care for someone at some point in our lives, and we want to be able to do that. Three in every five people become a carer at some point. Members of this House and of the other place, and our staff, are carers too.

In leading this debate, I should declare an interest. I was a carer, although I did not realise it. I was a hidden carer. We are nothing if we do not bring our own experiences to bear in our work in the House. I was a “sandwich carer”—that is, someone with small children and older, ill parents. We became so friendly with the local ambulance service that we were on first name terms, and I thank them all for the kindness they showed me and my family. My dad was affected by an incident at work and was cared for by my mother for more than 25 years. That had a massive financial impact on me as I grew up and on our family. And when dad was gone, guess what, mum needed looking after too, because when you are looking after someone you often forget to look after yourself. People can go downhill quite quickly in those circumstances.

I found myself muddling along looking after small children, going to GP surgeries and getting mum up to London, where we struggled on the escalators and on the tube to get to vital hospital appointments. I did not realise that that was an ongoing role for me. I gave up my job and threw myself into it. I remember the phone calls. One came when I was about to go on air at a radio station just before 6 o'clock in the morning. Dad was unresponsive. There had been a problem with his insulin. Luckily, mum was awake because she was going to care for my children, covering for me while I was at work. She was caring for me, I was caring for her, and we were all caring for dad. When the phone rang, I had to drop everything and get there. For me, that was a snapshot of what people are doing day in, day out, and year in, year out. There is no break. If someone is lucky to get one, that is great, but it is still your watch even when they are not with you—are they in the right place?

A particular story that comes to mind was when my dad developed glaucoma as a result of the diabetes that was brought on by the head injury. He was given respite, but at that point he had not told people that he was losing his sight. He was in a respite centre and got lost going to the loo in the middle of the night. He got in the wrong lift and was wandering around a strange place. He was over 70, frightened and concerned though he was meant to be in a safe place. That story meant that no further respite was taken, meaning no further breaks.

[Mims Davies]

I want to move on from my experiences, but please remember that all of us will be doing this. There are people in the House who do it already. I hope that we can recognise and understand the issue.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): Will my hon. Friend allow me to add that each of our offices has caseworkers to whom we should pay tribute for their dedication in trying to help carers and others? That is only one part of carers week, but it is one that should always be remembered. We are grateful to them.

**Mims Davies:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. My caseworkers have been into the community, meeting constituents who are unable to come to surgeries or drop-ins. They have been to refuges to see women with difficult disability issues. They are prepared for anything and we would be nowhere without them.

Today's debate will allow us to realise that caring will only increase in importance. With an ageing population and advances in medical science, we are seeing a steady increase in those who need care and those who are willing and able to provide it. Since 2001, the carer population has grown by a staggering 16.5%. There is a strong economic case for doing more for our carers. The economic value of the contribution made by 6 million carers is £132 billion a year, which is nearly equal to the UK's total health spend.

As the number of young carers grows to over 700,000, perhaps we need a national day to recognise them and to highlight and support what they do. They look after family members who are physically ill, mentally ill, disabled or perhaps even misusing substances. These young children miss out on many normal childhood experiences that they should be taking part in. Young carers can sometimes be isolated and bullied owing to the pressures they face at home.

**Mark Tami** (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that many such carers are hidden and scared of coming forward to seek help? They are worried that they might end up in care themselves because their parents, or their parent, are unable to look after them.

**Mims Davies:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point. I absolutely agree. Pointing out that there are difficulties at home can be a frightening experience, and young carers may wonder what it will mean for them. It may feel better to say nothing, but that is a frightening place in which to be.

Young carers often miss school days. When they become young adults, they are more likely to drop out of college or be unable to head to university. That is not good enough after all they have put into their families and given the impact on their lives. They need support when helping their loved ones. They display real human decency at such a young age and suffer as a result. We should be nurturing, supporting and applauding our young carers.

The vast majority of carers are of working age. Many of them want to work, and 3 million people juggle full or part-time work with their caring duties. At the House of Commons carers event this week, I spoke to carers who are juggling their desire to do it all and who are not dropping the ball even though their health is often suffering. They are sometimes aware that they are able

to care for their loved ones only for a limited time: they need to stay in the workplace for financial reasons. It is often not a choice; it is forced.

It is bad for companies if they lose our carers because the carers feel they have no choice but to walk out the door, which is what I did. If I was not in this place, I would now be without any caring responsibilities—apart from the two small children who do not seem to have been adopted yet, so I have to remember to look after them! I would be looking for a job and would have been out of the workplace for some time.

**Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for securing this debate today. Does she agree that carers contribute a great wealth of experience and other skill sets to employers that non-carers perhaps cannot?

**Mims Davies:** Absolutely. Carers have a can-do attitude that they bring to the workplace. If I was rewriting my CV, I would hope to put that on there.

It is bad for carers to fall out of the workplace. When asked about their experiences, the results were astonishing. Over a third of carers felt that their employer simply did not understand their caring role, and a third said that their employer did not have policies in place to support them. Flexible working is a key support mechanism to help carers to do their valuable work. Some progress has been made in supporting flexible or agile working. A limited right to request flexible working was introduced in 2002, and I am pleased that the Children and Families Act 2014 extended that to all employees after 26 weeks. However, given the pressures that carers face, that is not long term enough. The Government need to look to do more. The new legal right also paves the way for a possible culture shift in flexible working, and I want employers to take up the mantle.

It is deeply worrying that there seems to be a strong gender bias, with caring falling mainly on women in their 40s, 50s and 60s. Let us make it acceptable for all to take the time to care. One in four women aged 50 to 64 has caring responsibilities for older or disabled loved ones compared with one in six men, but I have met men in my constituency who have given up their jobs to care. I would like to see that as a real possibility. If someone wants to be there and can be there, it does not matter who they are.

This debate is an excellent opportunity to pay tribute here in the House to the crucial work of carers. Some 20% of carers currently receive no support with their caring work, because they simply have not put their head above the parapet. They do not realise that they are carers, and I know how that feels. Half of carers expect their quality of life to get worse in the next year, which people made clear at the carers event in the House earlier this week. People are concerned that they are not looking after themselves and simply do not know how to facilitate that. The national carers strategy is currently being written, and I am delighted that the Minister has written to me as part of the process and that I am involved. He is allowing time to focus on the matter to ensure that we get it right. I hope that the debate will give hon. Members the chance to set out clearly to the Government and to the country that we are not doing enough for our carers and that they are struggling.

1.19 pm

**Sue Hayman** (Workington) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) for securing the debate. I am sure that this is an issue that touches many hon. Members. In my family, my father needs caring for, and the circumstances will be the same for many of us. As our population ages, the situation will only get worse.

I want to focus particularly on carers' finances, as the struggle that many carers face in making ends meet has been raised with me repeatedly by my constituents, including Graeme McGrory, who cares for his partner Ann, and who has explained to me that the carer's allowance—the main benefit for carers—is the lowest benefit of its kind. It works out at £1.77 an hour. If we compare that with £7.20 for the national living wage, we can see that there is a huge gap. In a 35-hour week, that gives a difference of £170 a week. I cannot imagine that there are many carers out there who work only 35 hours a week; I imagine most work much longer.

It is not just that the carer's allowance is so low. The Government also need to make sure that when any changes are made—for example, to the minimum wage—or when any welfare reform is implemented, the impact on carers is properly assessed, so that they are not affected negatively. For example, at the moment the carer's allowance threshold is £110 a week. Before April, if a carer worked for 16 hours a week on the minimum wage, they would earn £107.20 a week, but the rise in the minimum wage that came in in April means that the same person is now earning £115.20. That is not a lot more, but it is enough to take them above the earnings limit. That puts carers in a difficult position. What are they supposed to do?

**Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): This has happened to a constituent of mine, and I can tell my hon. Friend what she had to do: she had to drop her working hours from 16 to 15 a week, because working 16 hours a week put her £5.20 over the income threshold and took away every penny of her carer's allowance. I implore the Minister to look into this, as it would only mean a £5.20 increase in the income threshold for carer's allowance. I would really appreciate it if he could come back to this issue in his remarks.

**Sue Hayman**: I thank my hon. Friend for that incredibly important point. If someone has to choose between cutting back on work or losing their entitlement, they are between a rock and a hard place. I do not want to believe that the Government would want to punish carers in such a way. I agree with my hon. Friend that this needs to be reviewed urgently. I hope that the Minister will consider reviewing the threshold, and that in future any changes will be considered from the perspective of the impact on people in receipt of carer's allowance, to ensure that they do not suffer unnecessarily.

There was the same problem of the Government not looking at the impact of new policies on carers when the bedroom tax was introduced. The Government introduced the change without considering the impact on carers, and without properly understanding why a spare bedroom can be so vital for families with a disabled, chronically ill or terminally ill member.

These are the reasons carers are struggling so much to cover basic living costs. That is particularly hard when family members have had to cut back on working hours to care for somebody; often, they will have given up well-paid careers. If the person being cared for has also had to give up their job—for example, because of an accident at work—that means that the family has to cope with a really steep drop in income. On top of that, if the family have children or are caring for elderly relatives, they are under a lot of stress and pressure. As the hon. Member for Eastleigh said, carers do society a huge service, saving all of us taxpayers a lot of money—an estimated £132 billion a year. If carers were to go on strike—perhaps they should if they want to get attention—imagine the impact on the NHS and local authorities. The people they care for could not just be abandoned.

The Government need to commit to helping, and to improving dramatically the situation for many carers. They also need to recognise that this dramatic loss of income often leaves carers with an increase in other costs. Carers UK's recent inquiry found that carers can face higher utility bills, transport costs and shopping bills. On top of that, they might also need to bear the cost of adaptations in the home. The recent report by the New Policy Institute found that there are now 1.2 million carers living in poverty. That is simply not good enough.

If we consider ourselves to be decent, compassionate people; if we believe in society and community; and if we recognise that any one of us here might become a full-time carer, or might need care, we must pledge to do more. We must come together to support carers, who do such an important job in our society and who are often exhausted, both physically and emotionally. We have to say: enough is enough. It is time that the Government stopped the shameful situation in which carers and their families are pushed into poverty. It is time that we all said, "Enough."

1.26 pm

**Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): Many people think of carers as a small but dedicated group, yet as we have heard today, as many as three in five people will be carers at some point in their life. There are an estimated 50,000 carers in Wiltshire alone—roughly 10% of our county's population—and 3,000 of those are under the age of 24. Mr Deputy Speaker, you or I could be a carer one day, but chances are that we would not realise our role. We would just think that we were caring for our loved ones. Some 70% of carers in Wiltshire continue to remain hidden, and it is believed that many of those people do not understand or recognise their caring status.

That is why this week and this debate are so important, and I applaud my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) for securing the debate. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. We need to work together to raise the profile of these silent heroes, these astonishing individuals who give and give, time and again. Carers enable hundreds of my constituents to continue to live in their own home. Let us face it: without carers, our NHS would not cope, our care homes would be flooded, and the independence of thousands would be compromised. The care provided,

[Michelle Donelan]

unpaid, by the nation's carers is worth an estimated £119 billion a year, but their role in our community and economy is invaluable.

I was delighted that the Government made an additional £400 million available to the NHS between 2011 and 2015 to provide carers with the breaks that they need from their caring responsibilities, and that we are developing a new national carers strategy to look at what more can be done for existing and future carers. That highlights an understanding and, importantly, appreciation of the role. Fundamentally, it shows the importance of caring for carers.

The charity sector plays a crucial role in enabling carers. An excellent example is the Independent Living Centre in Semington in my constituency, a charity that offers first-class impartial advice, and solutions for easier living. A support network is equally essential for carers. It can be an isolating role, and one about which non-carers often know little and have little understanding. In a study of more than 6,000 carers, half had let a health problem go untreated, or seen their mental health get worse, as a direct result of the time and effort that they had put into caring for their loved ones.

Fun4All is an impressive local charity in Chippenham. One of its aims is to improve the health and wellbeing of carers by providing social events and breaks, and crucially, it forges a network between carers. I attended one of its fish-and-chip lunches with entertainment, and I can assure the House that it is certainly fun for all.

Also based in my constituency is Carer Support Wiltshire, with whom I have volunteered. I saw at first hand its extremely high level of work and dedication, and its enormous impact on the lives of so many local people. Its role as a charity locally cannot be overstated. It helps carers to access support, services, education and training, as well as breaks from their caring role. This Sunday, it is organising an awareness and fundraising event called "Walk a mile in my shoes" in Chippenham. Last year it proved very successful. I look forward to participating once again, and wish it success.

A key hurdle for carers, as we have heard, is juggling their caring role with employment. Last year we made a massive leap forward when we extended to carers the right to request flexible working arrangements to help them balance work and care; but many problems remain, and it is still a huge challenge to balance the two. It is often about having the ability to cope, but also a level of understanding from the employer.

Carer Support Wiltshire has devised a scheme intended to raise awareness and understanding among employers. It has a strategic arm dedicated to that. I have worked with it on this, and although the strategy is in its early stages, it is a blueprint that could be replicated throughout the country. Employers need to understand the benefits that carers offer and not see them only as a strain on their business. It is important to stress that the issue of supporting carers needs to be targeted nationally and locally, and within the voluntary sector.

Nationally, the Care Act 2014 gave carers fundamental legal rights, and I hope that the national strategy will directly challenge the problems that carers face. Specifically, I hope that we will look at supporting more training

opportunities locally to ensure that those in a caring capacity always have the confidence, abilities and skills to perform their role.

Wiltshire Council is finalising its local strategy on carers, which will bring many organisations together to support carers. A variety of services are already in action in my constituency, such as complementary therapies, outings, trips, counselling, befriending services, talk and support services, carers' cafés—the list is endless, but still much more work is needed.

Fundamentally, there is a complete and utter lack of understanding of the role of carers and the support available. I have seen that time and again in my constituency surgeries. Very many constituents have come to me, complaining that they are struggling, stressed, worried. They do not know what benefits they are entitled to. If I had £1 for every time someone has come to me who is entitled to the carer's allowance but does not realise it, I would have sent out a lot more leaflets by now. We need to address this head-on. We need to go even further, and I am confident that the national strategy will encompass strenuous efforts to address the awareness and entitlement issues.

Many of the constituents who come to me are pensioners, and they do not realise that if their state pension falls below the amount of the carer's allowance, they are in effect entitled to a top-up. Alternatively, if they are not in that bracket, they have what is defined as an "underlying entitlement to carer's allowance", which means that when they are means-tested, that is reviewed. I mention these entitlements today because I am convinced that it is important to stress them, and to get the message out to any elderly carers who are watching.

**Mims Davies:** My hon. Friend hit the nail on the head when she talked about the importance of better communication—of communicating to carers who feel isolated and vulnerable about the support that is available and the opportunities to make things better. As a result of today's debate and through the Minister, we could look at communicating better with that group of people.

**Michelle Donelan:** I thank my hon. Friend. I could not agree more with her comments today. Another thing that concerns me deeply is that it is very easy to stereotype a carer, yet the reality is very different from the stereotype. The 2011 census identified 166,363 young carers under the age of 18 caring for a family member or friend; more than 110,073 were under 16. The real figure, allowing for hidden carers, is very much greater. Yes, the Children and Families Act 2014 extended the right to an assessment of support needs to all young carers under the age of 18; and since 2010 the Government have created specific training guides for teachers and teaching staff, to enable them to identify and support young carers.

However, there is still a big problem, which we need to face up to. Around one in 20 young carers regularly miss school because of their caring role. Young carers often get lower grades; a recent survey showed their most common grade at GCSE to be D. Young carers are twice as likely as their peers not to be in education, employment or training. They are therefore more entitled than other groups to the support that we can offer. That is why it would be completely wrong for me not to stress that I completely and utterly support the campaign to



allow the pupil premium to show its understanding of the stresses, strains and pressures on young people who are carers. Does not a young carer, like any other young person, deserve the best shot at life, the best chances, the best opportunities? It is extremely hard to be a carer at any age. Imagine combining that with struggling to cope with schoolwork, GCSEs or A-levels, while growing up. Imagine the impact of that—the emotional pressure it would create. In this country we have a pupil premium, which is designed to develop a level playing field. Surely it is time that young carers were allowed on the pitch too.

National Carers Week is all about highlighting the silent heroes, of all ages, in our community, whose dedicated love keeps people safe, secure and often living in their own home. Without them, the economy and the community that we all love in our constituencies would collapse. Today, I hope that we help raise awareness and understanding, show our support, and highlight the different ways that we can improve and develop our national strategy.

I would like to finish by thanking each and every carer in my constituency and in the country for all their hard work.

1.36 pm

**Corri Wilson** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): According to the family resources survey, there are at least 5.3 million informal carers in the UK, although the number might be higher. There are thought to be more than half a million carers in Scotland, 10,000 of whom are in my constituency. The good news for carers is that, under the Scotland Act, benefits for carers, disabled people and those who are ill are being devolved to the Scottish Parliament.

The UK Government are renowned for their disregard for the disabled. Disabled people have already taken a cut to their benefits, which will affect their ability to live independently, and consequently the support they require from carers. Those cuts not only affect the livelihood of disabled people but their carers, who will be impacted too by the overall cut in support for the person they care for.

The Scottish Government's approach to social security recognises the need to ensure that disabled people and their carers are fully supported with dignity and respect. It is estimated that unpaid carers in Scotland save the Scottish economy almost £11 billion a year, so it is little surprise that the Scottish Government see social security as an investment in the people of Scotland. Unpaid carers are the backbone of community care, and play an indispensable role in supporting the needs of their loved ones, often at an enormous cost to their own health and wellbeing.

I often think "carer" seems a tiny, inconsequential word that is in total contrast to the reality of being a carer. What does being a carer mean? A carer is a personal assistant, undertaking duties such as washing and dressing, morning and night. A carer is a medic, administering medication, assessing health needs and determining whether to seek medical assistance. A carer is a cleaner, dealing with multiple changes of clothes throughout the day and cleaning up accidental spillages. A carer is a risk assessor, carrying out health and safety checks to ensure that the person they are caring for is in

a safe environment—for example, away from kettles and cookers—and cannot wander out the front door. A carer is a driver, to the numerous health and hospital visits. An outing, however small, is not like an outing that you or I would have. It is essential to be ready for all eventualities—medication, if it should be taken at a certain time; emergency changes of clothing.

A carer is a negotiator, collaborating with the many services that are now part of their life. A carer is a cook and a waitress or waiter, ensuring that the person they care for has tasty, appetising meals even when their appetite is diminished. A carer is a friend who is there to listen and offer support, particularly when things are difficult. A carer is on constant night shift, sleeping with one eye and one ear open to make sure that nobody has got up during the night. A carer is an entertainer, looking for ways to brighten the day, and a Philadelphia lawyer to cope with and understand the mountain of paperwork that comes with the role and the services involved. A carer has to be strong, both emotionally and physically. That list is not exhaustive but, as hon. Members can see, the small word "carer" does not quite cut it.

Having cared for my lovely father, who has dementia and Alzheimer's, I have first-hand experience of the juggling act that carers have to perform every single day. It is exhausting, mentally and physically, and often it is impossible to predict what will happen from one day to the next, which is why the support services are so important for carers. The fantastic East Ayrshire Carers Centre in my constituency provides invaluable respite breaks to carers, allowing them to recharge their batteries and continue caring. It also offers training for young carers.

As we have heard, young carers may struggle to balance caring with being at school and often feel isolated, and they do not have the same recreational opportunities as their peers. This can impact on the opportunities open to them when they leave school. The Dalmellington carers centre offers work placements to young people to give them skills, experience and the confidence to find work, but those skills and experience are of no use if employers are not able to offer flexible working patterns.

It is not just young carers who are affected. The majority of carers are of working age. Carers UK estimates that the economic value of the contribution made by these carers is £132 billion a year. However, according to the New Policy Institute, more than 2 million of them are living in poverty. Almost 1.5 million people of working age spend at least 20 hours a week caring for someone, and more than a third of them are living in poverty. As demand for care continues to increase—and as the state pension age rises—the pressures of managing care and work are becoming a reality for more and more people.

Working-age adults with substantial care commitments are sacrificing their income from employment to undertake unpaid care. Many are forced to give up work entirely. Women take on a disproportionate responsibility for care in the UK, which is further widening the gender pay gap and increasing inequality between men and women. Caring falls particularly on women in their 40s, 50s and 60s. Research in 2012 found that women were four times more likely than men to give up work because of multiple caring responsibilities. Women pay a high

[Corri Wilson]

price for time taken out of work, and this disadvantage persists well beyond the years they spend caring. Breaks in employment and part-time work have a long-term impact on women's incomes across their lifetime, on their ability to progress in the workplace, and on their ability to save for their retirement.

A lack of carer-friendly workplace policies means that an increasing number of employees, more often than not women, are forced to either give up work at the peak of their careers or move to part-time working. Just last year the Prime Minister pledged to end the pay gap within a generation. If this Government are serious about tackling the pay gap, employment law needs to respond to the increases in unpaid caring. The extent to which the labour market is able to accommodate people with caring responsibilities is important. We have a responsibility to break down the barriers to carers' access to employment opportunities. Increasing the availability of quality part-time, flexible work, as well as raising the awareness of the right to request flexible working, would be important steps towards supporting carers to enter employment that suits their needs.

There has been a tendency in the UK to see part-time working as the only solution to balancing employment with caring responsibilities, but part-time work means limited promotion and progression opportunities, and is much more likely to be available only in low-skill, low-pay sectors. Whereas women dominate part-time work, uptake is more evenly balanced between men and women where flexible working is available. I acknowledge that the Government have extended the right to request flexible working, but there are no policies in place to address the lack of jobs being advertised with that as an option.

In conclusion, this Government appear to accept the benefits of flexible working, but are doing little to expand its use as a mainstream employment model. If the Government are truly committed to supporting the ability of carers to work, they need to do more to address the issue of access to flexible work, supported by carer's allowance and other benefits.

1.44 pm

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am delighted to take part in today's proceedings and I congratulate the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) on securing today's debate. I thank her, the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) for sharing their personal experiences. I am not a carer myself, but I have close family members who require care and I recognise the stresses that have been described.

The motion asks us to consider carers and their contribution to society. This debate has been organised to coincide with carers week, when we celebrate carers and thank them for the vital role they play in society. Carers not only perform an important role for the person whom they look after, but their selfless acts help ease the demand on our public services. Across the UK, this unpaid care is worth an estimated £100 billion each year. I often wonder what would happen to our public

services if our unpaid carers decided not to continue to provide the care that they do. How would we respond to that?

Carers week is very worthwhile, but we as parliamentarians fail carers and those they look after if we debate, celebrate and take note of carers' issues only in this week. This is just a normal week for our carers. I do not doubt that carers value our thanks and appreciation, but after speaking to a number of carers in my constituency, I know that some of them tend to avoid carers week. They are desperate for more than the usual "unsung heroes" soundbites or the "pat on the back" platitudes. This should be a week of celebration and thanks, but more importantly this should be a week when we talk with, not to, carers in order better to understand the experiences that come from being a carer.

As I said, I am not a carer and I do not pretend to know all the issues facing carers. Nevertheless, I have pledged to fight the corner for carers as I sincerely and honestly have the utmost respect for them. When I was first elected, I quickly set up 13 surgeries a month, one of which is a specific monthly carers surgery at Renfrewshire Carers Centre, which allows me to hear at first hand some of the issues and challenges that carers face. There are more than 9,000 known carers in my constituency and these surgeries can be heart wrenching, but they also motivate me to do more to help ease the burdens that our carers face daily.

My constituency office is only too well aware of the challenges and struggles that carers face, as one of my staff members, Lynn Williams, recently had to resign from her post in order to care for her husband full-time. This was a real blow for the office, because Lynn was, as we say in Scotland, a well kent figure in the caring and voluntary sectors. After three years working for the Princess Royal Trust for Carers and lobbying to improve the lives of carers, she went on to be asked to join the Scottish Government's welfare expert working group, all the while combining full-time work with caring for her husband.

We often talk about the £100 billion a year that carers save the UK economy, but very rarely do we talk about the economic loss that occurs when our talented people such as Lynn are forced to leave the economy because of caring commitments. Carers UK and Age UK estimated that in 2012 £5.3 billion was wiped from the UK economy as a result of the lost earnings of carers giving up work to care. At a time when austerity is gripping our economy, it makes no sense whatever that we allow such a significant amount to be lost to our economy.

There is a clear and urgent need to reform the current care and support system to ensure that hard-working individuals are not forced to leave the workplace. We also need to create a working environment that raises awareness of the challenges that carers can encounter. I want to see an environment where employers are aware of the struggles and demands that carers face, and thus create a flexible working environment that can deal with those caring responsibilities. I support the Carer Positive scheme, which seeks to recognise employers who support carers. Around one in seven people in the workforce will have a caring responsibility, and with the number of carers expected to increase, we need to encourage more organisations to operate flexible working environments

for carers. This will be good for business, good for the economy, and good for carers and the people they care for.

In Scotland, the SNP Government have a strong track record of working with carers to help develop policies that make carers' lives that bit easier. We have invested around £114 million in programmes to support carers—more than ever before. A £13 million short break fund has provided around 15,000 carers and cared-for people with the opportunity to relax without feeling stress or guilt. The Carers Parliament has been established to provide carers, young carers and carer representatives from across Scotland with the opportunity to discuss and debate matters important to them.

My first ever speech to an SNP conference—to 3,000 people in Glasgow, incidentally—was about carers. In it I called for carer's allowance to rise at the very least to match jobseeker's allowance. As a bare minimum, our carers deserve parity with other income replacement benefits. I was therefore delighted when, just a few weeks later, the Scottish Government announced that, with new powers over social security, they would do precisely that—a commitment that will benefit carers by nearly £600 a year. I am aware, however, that many carers do not believe that this increase in carer's allowance is enough, and they have a strong case. I hope that this is only a start and that the debate is now open about how we value and reward caring in Scotland.

Furthermore, only today the Scottish Government announced, through their newly appointed Social Security Minister, Jeane Freeman, that they intend to consult on a young carer's allowance, stating:

“It is unfair that some young people who have the responsibility and pressure of caring for a loved one may experience financial difficulties. That is why we will now consider whether a Young Carer's Allowance could bridge that gap in support.”

I call on the UK Government to match the increase in carer's allowance in Scotland and to consider a young carer's allowance, to ensure that carers both young and old right across these islands can benefit.

I am under no illusion that there is much more that we can and should do to help improve the lives of our carers. I am sure that I am not the only Member who has been keeping an eye on #RealCarersWeek, which has been trending on Twitter. This hashtag has provided a glimpse into the lives and struggles of our carers. Tweets have been posted raising awareness of the endless bureaucracy and form-filling, which other Members have alluded to. They refer to the sleepless nights and endless visits to GPs and hospitals, and to the lack of appreciation that certain Governments have for the role that carers provide for our society. Unfortunately, there have been many disgusting responses from some ignorant and small-minded people, many of whom, ironically, will require care at some point in their lives. When politicians rightly tweet their support for carers week using #CarersWeek, I strongly encourage them to read some of the tweets under #RealCarersWeek as well.

I want to challenge the UK Government directly on the pain that their policies are causing in the lives of carers and those they care for. The Government may want to hide behind soundbites such as “hard choices”, “fairness” and “empowering the claimant.” However, they are only soundbites that attempt to justify the pain and stress that is being caused. Carers are exhausted with the endless form-filling that they are expected to

undertake, or the lack of appreciation that they receive. However, the biggest stress that they experience is seeing their loved one have to deal with their own personal pain. They are angry with the effect that personal independence payment assessments—often pointless but always demeaning—are having on the quality of life of the people they care for.

I am sure that I am not the only one who was upset and angry after reading *The Guardian* article that suggested that 500 adapted cars, powered wheelchairs and scooters are being taken away from disabled people each week. The article, by Dr Frances Ryan, states that PIP is a disaster for disabled people and asks whether welfare reform is becoming dangerous for them. I will let others make their own conclusions, but forcing 500 disabled people each week to become housebound is not productive for the person directly affected, for their carer, or indeed for the economy.

While it is right that we take time properly to thank and credit carers for the role they perform in society, let us give carers what they really want: a commitment from parliamentarians of all persuasions that we will listen to them, work with them and deliver for them.

1.53 pm

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) not only for securing the debate, but for bringing to the Chamber her powerful experiences and sharing them with us. I also want to thank the Minister for all that he does to ensure that carers are given the support they need and deserve.

I want to sign up to the suggestion made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) that we should extend the pupil premium to all young carers. There are 160,000 young carers whose life chances are disadvantaged by the amazing duty that they perform. Extending the pupil premium to all those young people seems to me to be a very fair exchange for all that they do.

Looking at the other end of the age spectrum, 28% of my constituents in Bexhill and Battle are over 65. By comparison, the national average is 17%. Accordingly, I have a very high number of older carers in my constituency. That is what I want to focus my contribution on today. The 2011 census revealed that there are over 1.8 million carers aged 60 and over in England—almost 16% of the population in that age range. The number of carers aged 85 and over grew by 128% in the past decade, according to a report published last year by Carers UK and Age UK, and it is expected to double over the next 20 years, according to a Government report from 2014.

East Sussex has the highest proportion of over-85s in the UK. Again, that group will be highly pertinent to my constituency. Supporting this army of carers is absolutely essential if we are to ensure that our NHS continues to function. Given the Government's welcome desire to support keeping people at home in their advancing years, rather than placing them in hospital, that support is even more important. I welcome the passing, by this Government when in coalition, of the Care Act 2014. The Act granted significant new rights to carers in England and placed duties on local authorities to ensure that support is delivered, advice is given and information

[*Huw Merriman*]

is provided. It also placed a duty on NHS bodies to co-operate with local authorities in delivering Care Act functions, which, if the clinical commissioning groups in East Sussex can work as a whole, will lead to a “Better Together” integrated health system in East Sussex.

I am conscious that the delivery of those rights is contingent on local authorities having the necessary financial resources in place. I welcome the devolution of business rates to my county, but the yield in East Sussex is low and the demands from a population with above-average ageing is high. Our county will need more time to deliver and more investment in infrastructure to attract new businesses to the coast if this is going to provide for carers and other groups who need local authority finance and support.

I welcome the new 2% levy that local authorities can apply to council tax, provided that it is spent on adult social care. While I champion the rights of carers within the home, many carers are caring for loved ones who reside in care homes due to complex or advanced needs. It is absolutely essential that those carers have the comfort of knowing that their loved ones will be well cared for when they are not in the home to deliver it. I have championed the care home industry, which features heavily in my constituency. Funding them properly via the new 2% levy will, I hope, result in better Care Quality Commission ratings than those that have been awarded following recent investigations.

Across East Sussex, 60% of our care homes were found to be inadequate or needing improvement. It concerns me greatly that, because of these poor ratings, many of our carers may choose to soldier on at home when a care home would be the better choice for their loved ones. All the care homes that I have visited in my constituency have been fantastic. It is important that those that need to improve do so with the extra funding that the Government have procured.

In a rural constituency such as mine, social isolation can be a particular concern. This is exacerbated for older carers looking after loved ones. According to a report published in 2011, more than two thirds of older carers reported not getting breaks away from caring at all, with a further third getting a break only once every two or three months, or less. Let me therefore take this opportunity to thank all those constituents who do so much to give carers a break. While I am at it, let me name-check my mother and my two sisters, who regularly host teas at home attended by carers who do not get the chance to get out of the house and get looked after by someone else for a change. While it is right to look to the Government to be the ultimate support, very often it is the community and their acts of kindness, via visits, conversations, moral support and basic errands, who improve the welfare and wellbeing of our elderly carers. I salute all those who do it.

I am keen for the Government to look at the following suggestions that were made to me by the fantastic Care for the Carers team in East Sussex. First, we should help national partners reach more carers. Would it be possible to make it a duty for the NHS to identify carers, in the same way that the Care Act does for local authorities? Secondly, we should ensure that carers have good support. Would it be possible to ensure that local

authorities do not charge carers for the support that they are entitled to? East Sussex is currently not charging carers, which I recognise and celebrate.

**Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point about the NHS having a duty to identify carers. I have tried three times to introduce that in a private Member’s Bill, so I am really pleased to find support for it among Conservative Members.

**Huw Merriman:** I am pleased, as a novice in the House, that there is agreement across the House on that cause.

Thirdly, there should be help for carers in complex situations—those caring for people with dementia or mental health problems. It seems to me to be an obvious ask to promote good practice recommendations to commissioners and health professionals and to promote it in national policy making.

Finally, I thank and express huge admiration for all those who care for others in my constituency and beyond. I know that they seek little praise, but it is right that we should praise them this afternoon.

2 pm

**Danny Kinahan** (South Antrim) (UUP): I am very pleased to speak on this subject, which covers so many areas. I am especially pleased to support the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) in this debate, which I thank her for bringing forward. I also support her call for a young carers day, which is essential, and I congratulate her on that idea.

I was never involved in this field in my time as a councillor and in the Northern Ireland Assembly, so all I have learned about it has been through the casework in my constituency offices. I thank all my staff, who have dealt with everything and pulled this together. They are just a small group of all those who work every day in our offices to help everyone concerned.

In learning on the job, I have also learned about the policy changes. In Northern Ireland, two policy changes have suddenly thrown up different things. One was the closure of residential homes. It seemed right to move people to be looked after at home, but at the same time it actually took away some people’s chances of respite when their loved ones stayed in a residential home. At times, we need to rethink what we are doing. The other involved the mental health hospital that kept trying to send home one person who was having great difficulties. His family could not cope, however, and he eventually drowned himself after putting on his waders and walking into the local reservoir.

We all need to be aware—this week has been quite fantastic in making people aware—of how hard everyone is working in the caring industry. I have been hugely impressed by those, whether the families, the neighbours, the community or all the organisations in our constituencies, who are pulling together to provide help. I have been horrified just as much, however, by the stories I have read this week and heard about at other times through my offices. There are stories about those who have very little support, and about the sacrifices they have had to make in using their savings, selling their house, losing

their job and all the awful things that go just because they are doing what is absolutely right in looking after their loved ones.

In Northern Ireland, there are some 220,000 carers—that figure has gone up nearly 20% in the past 10 years—which is one in eight of the population. Some 30,000 people care for more than one person, and some 26% of carers provide more than 50 hours of care a week. I am sure the figures are no different in all the other constituencies, but this debate today, and this week, is for getting across our points about the importance of carers. In 2016, it is estimated that carers in Northern Ireland save the state £4.6 billion. A massive amount is going on—I will not steal all the statistics from my colleague, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who I know has many more to cite—but I want to congratulate and salute all those involved.

From what I have learned this week, I believe that if we are to adopt the national strategy for carers, it needs to be pulled together into a longer-term strategy in the same way as happened with pensions. Caring covers many other fields, so a strategy needs to be worked out with those fields so that everything is joined up and they all work together. My age-old point is that it is phenomenally important to get all the countries in the United Kingdom working together.

One thing was really brought home to me during the particularly cold spell in Northern Ireland some five years ago when I was working with Home-Start to help families in Antrim. I think it was 18° below, and it came down to a heat or eat choice for some families so, by pulling together with local businesses, we helped to get food for people. The next day, those who delivered it said that two of the families broke down in tears when the food was brought to their doors because they had been pushed right to the limit. That is the sort of story we should take away from today.

There are so many points to mention, including about helping carers to be recognised by everyone and getting employers to be more flexible in looking after them with, for example, a tapering pay limit. So many things are now coming out, and this week has been fantastic in teaching all of us, so I congratulate everyone involved. I thank hon. Members for listening to me.

2.5 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate, and to thank the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) for bringing it forward for us all to participate in. This is the second such debate that she has led on this subject, and we look forward to many more on similar subjects in times to come. I also thank all those who have spoken—I understand that I will be the last to speak from the Back Benches before the shadow Minister and the Minister. The hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) has just nipped out, but I look forward to her speech, and I very much look forward to the Minister's. I have honestly found the shadow Minister and the Minister to be compassionate—we have a compassionate shadow Minister and a compassionate Minister—and I am convinced that their responses will both focus on the issues we have raised and those that it is important for us to be involved with.

Carers UK estimates that there are some 6.5 million carers in the UK. Over 1 million people in the UK say that they are supporting or caring for family members

who have an illness that is terminal, which is also an issue. To put those figures into perspective, there are two carers for every person who died last year in the United Kingdom. Statistically, that is a massive figure. It is estimated that the NHS saves some £11.6 billion each year because of these unsung heroes. We have used that expression often today, but just because we use it often does not mean that it is any less appropriate. Their contribution as volunteer carers is immeasurably valuable.

Carers may end up providing more than 100 hours of care per week. From my knowledge of those who come to see me and those with whom I have worked in my constituency, I know that 100 hours per week is a low estimate. For some of them, caring is a 24/7 exercise, such are the medical and health difficulties of those for whom they care. All too often the outside world is completely oblivious of their efforts. Even those who know carers may be oblivious, because they do not always know what is happening once the door is closed and the carer is left alone to look after the cared for. We do not know what happens behind those closed doors.

I believe that employers are forcing some workers to forgo promotions. That is clearly stated in the background information that has been provided, on which I congratulate those in the Library. Its staff are not often thanked for what they do, but the background information they have provided—the stats and the paperwork—is very detailed and informative, and they deserve to be congratulated on how well they have prepared us for this debate.

Carers have said that they have had to forgo promotions, reduce working hours or leave work altogether. More than a third of them do not feel comfortable at work talking about caring, just over a third say their employer does not understand their caring role and exactly a third say their employer does not have policies in place to support carers. Some 60% of carers have given up work or reduced their hours to provide care, 25% have been unable to pursue or have had to turn down a promotion, 37% say their work has suffered and 42% say they have struggled financially. These are not just figures; these are people's lives.

The figures illustrate very clearly what the issues are. Some 55% of carers have struggled financially, as it says in the background information. My colleague, the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan), mentioned that. I suppose all MPs have personal knowledge of this, but we are certainly aware of how carers are struggling in Northern Ireland. Some 72% of carers have given up work or reduced their hours. Again, these figures tell us where the problems are.

As the hon. Member for Eastleigh said, Carers Week is being supported by all the health organisations, including Age UK, the Carers Trust, Independent Age, Macmillan Cancer Support, the Motor Neurone Disease Association, and the Multiple Sclerosis Society. I work with these organisations almost every day of the week. They are household names, unfortunately, because of the level of problems that we have across the whole of Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom.

A subject close to my heart, as is the case for many of those here, is dementia and Alzheimer's disease. A few months ago, we had a debate on that in Westminster Hall. I have not experienced it personally in my family, but I have certainly experienced it through meeting

[*Jim Shannon*]

some of my constituents and their families. It is hard to explain to anyone who has not experienced it. These are very delicate issues to address; they are not just physical but emotional and mental. I have seen people with dementia who can often, unknowingly, become agitated or even violent. Night-time wandering can have a serious impact on carers' sleep patterns, let alone the sufferer's. Many people out there require someone close to them to give up much of their lives to provide the care that they need. Sleep patterns are just the tip of the iceberg.

I commend the groups in my area, particularly some of the church groups. For example, a Church of Ireland church, St Mark's in Newtownards, has a group for the whole of Ards and North Down where people with dementia and Alzheimer's come together to do painting and crafts. Music is a wonderful thing for helping those with dementia and Alzheimer's. It helps to relax them, and for some people it takes them back to where they were many years ago—to their youth and their childhood.

**Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is speaking movingly about the challenges that dementia sufferers and their carers face. This week the Carers Trust raised with me concerns about patchy levels of support in dementia care around the country. Does he agree that local authorities need to go out and learn from best practice around the country, such as the church groups in his constituency and the successful dementia gateways in Dudley, to make sure that more carers and more dementia sufferers can receive the support they so desperately need?

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I wholeheartedly agree; I think we all do. Those of us who are aware of this issue will understand the importance of all these groups. The issue that he touches on was frequently mentioned in the debate in Westminster Hall. Some 38 Members were involved in that debate, and it got a massive response. I thank him for his very important words.

The hon. Member for Eastleigh referred to young carers, as have other hon. Members. Crossroads Young Carers in Newtownards has been around for many years. We have a massive number of young carers in my constituency alone. I was rather shocked to find that they were so numerically strong. That illustrated to me the importance of the role of these schoolchildren, sometimes even primary schoolchildren, who almost become old before their time in looking after parents and family. The Carers Trust says that 80% of young carers miss out childhood experiences. They grow up before their time. They miss out on the leisure, the fun and the nights out with friends because they are looking after their mum, dad, brother, sister, or whoever it may be. They are almost hidden carers in the job that they do. I recognise the good work that Crossroads Young Carers does in my constituency.

We need an awareness campaign about carers so that they are no longer the unsung heroes but become the recognised heroes that they should be, not just in this House but in all our constituencies across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Too often, carers are left to suffer in silence. The services on offer are not publicised enough and,

sadly, too often are not up to standard either. When we read the background material that explains some of the everyday events that carers have to deal with, we get a feeling for and an idea of what they endure each day. I am not sure whether this has been mentioned yet, but, if not, it needs to be put on the record: many carers suffer from bad health themselves as a result of looking after others. In an intense situation, looking after someone 24/7, they need some time to switch off—their brain and their body have to get a bit of rest. It is very important every now and again to get a weekend, or even an hour or two, away from it all.

The main social security benefit available to carers is carer's allowance. This is for someone who provides more than 35 hours of care a week, and it entitles them to only £62.10. Furthermore, carers may incur sanctions on how much they can earn on top of the allowance. Dementia carers save the NHS more than £11 billion per year, to put a financial cost on it, yet they get only £62.10 per week for giving up their lives for someone less fortunate. I know that the Minister's Department is not responsible for that, but, with respect, it is not a good reflection on Government, given the hours that carers spend on caring. I recognise that times are tough financially. You cannot produce a high-quality suit if you have low-quality cloth, and the same thing applies to finances. We therefore have to be realistic about what we can do, but it must be highly insulting to carers to see some of the things happening in the news when they are getting only £62.10 per week. Although the Minister is not responsible for benefits, could he give some pointer for carers with regard to benefits advice? I give them benefits advice when they come to my office. To be fair, the benefits system is very responsive. We just have to point people in the right direction and show them the right opportunity. Perhaps there is a role for Government in that. I understand that our colleagues in Scotland have considered upping the carer's allowance. That was discussed in our debate on dementia and Alzheimer's.

Carers UK calculates that the value of unpaid care is some £132 billion each year—the equivalent of NHS spending. Although it is hard to calculate how much of this relates to people who care for someone who has a terminal illness, research has found that carers who look after someone with one of the four most prevalent cancers—lung, breast, colorectal or prostate—provide care worth £219 million per year: a third of the total of end-of-life care costs. Providing end-of-life care—that difficult time for people emotionally and physically—saves the NHS a massive amount of money as well. Other people have referred to personal things in families. My mother looked after my dad before he passed away, and that was not always easy. My mum is a fresh 85-year-old, or she will be on 14 July. If it were not for the closeness and the commitment of family, we would face a lot of other serious issues.

According to research by Carers UK's Northern Ireland subsidiary, Carers NI, 16% of carers cannot afford to pay their utility bills, while nearly 40% cannot afford their bills without struggling financially. I can vouch for that in my constituency, given the numbers of people who come to me who are finding it very difficult to make ends meet financially. The hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) raised the question of heating or eating during the cold spell. That is a reality today as well, perhaps even more so than in the past. A third of

carers are using savings to pay everyday living costs, and a third have used up any savings they had and now have nothing to fall back on. Thirty-two per cent. of carers have ended up in debt as a result of caring, and over four in 10 carers—almost half—are cutting back on food or heating. Furthermore, carers experience higher levels of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK. We have the highest levels of fuel poverty in the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Information given to us by the Library indicates that 51% of carers

“have let a health problem go untreated...Half of carers (50%) have seen their mental health get worse...Two thirds of carers (66%) have given up work or reduced their hours to care...Almost half of carers (47%) have struggled financially...Almost one third of carers (31%) only get help when it is an emergency.”

That is the reality for carers. Full-time carers are twice as likely as non-carers to be in bad health. Eighty per cent. of carers say that caring has had a negative impact on their health, and half of carers state that they experienced depression after taking on a caring role. Sixty-three per cent. of carers say that they are at breaking point, and one in six carers receive no practical support at all. Despite an ongoing rise in the number of carers in the UK and sharp rises in the number of people caring full time, the number of people who receive carers' assessments and carers' services is falling. When we hear all those stats, we need to remember that there are people behind them who have to deal with reality.

It is often said, and we need to say it again, that food banks have been extremely helpful. That is the case in my constituency and, I am sure, in others. Food banks operate out of compassion and heart. They bring together Government bodies, churches and individuals who want to do their bit for the community. The food bank in my area, run by the Trussell Trust, has done exceptional work with carers, those who are under financial pressure and those who are experiencing delays in benefit or not getting all the benefits that they should be getting. The food bank is very much a part of life in my constituency. By the way, I think it is good to have food banks in our constituencies. They bring a lot of good things to my area. I do not see them as a negative; I see them as a positive, because people reach out and want to help each other. That is good, because if we help each other, we do what we are supposed to be doing in this world, which is to make lives better as best we can.

Carers UK estimates that the number of carers will grow to 9 million by 2037. Will any of us in this Chamber be here in 2037? I am not sure. I probably will not be—if I am, I will be the oldest man in the world, but that is by the way. We have to look at the stats, because they take us to where we will be in a few years' time. I hope that the Government take cognisance of the stats, because it is important to form a strategy.

It is clear already that the support provided to carers does not suffice. Independent analysis demonstrates that the gap in funding for social care is expected to reach between £2.8 billion and £3.5 billion by the end of this Parliament, and that does not even begin to cover what will happen if the Government do not take into account the fact that the number of carers is growing. This should serve as a wake-up call to everyone—the Government, the regional Assemblies in the devolved

Administrations and all stakeholders—about the reality ahead. There will be significantly more carers than there are already, and appropriate planning is needed to ensure that support is there.

I conclude with these comments. I welcome the fact that the Government are developing a new carers strategy, and I look forward to the Minister's response on that. It is important that we, as elected representatives, put forward this debate in a positive fashion to get a strategy and responses to our questions, which we can feed back to our constituents. On the issues that I and others have raised, I impress on the policy makers the need to remember that there are real people behind all the statistics. It is people such as carers whom we are elected to serve. I can only hope that the debate will raise awareness of the need for urgent and large-scale reform of the way in which the Government treat carers.

A number of carer support groups come together in the churches and the community centres of Strangford. They are wonderful people who do great work, and they deserve to be supported and helped by us, as MPs through our Government and through the regional Assemblies, in whatever way we can. Those groups bring together all the people of the Ards and North Down Council area who want to participate. They give carers much needed opportunities for rest and socialisation. The opportunity to socialise and interact with others, or to get a moment or two to themselves, can make a world of difference to carers.

2.24 pm

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) for securing this debate in carers week. Frankly, one week in the year is not enough; carers care for more than just one week in the year. I will talk predominantly about informal carers—the people who are looking after family—but we should also remember the people who work in the care industry, because they support the carers and the people who need caring for. We have problems getting high-quality care because we do not value those people. We pay them very poorly. They work for companies that often treat them badly. Pay for travel time may not be included, and they may be doing 15-minute visits. These jobs are therefore short term and temporary, and people get out of them as soon as they have the opportunity. Unless we turn this into a profession that is valued and respected and includes development—as we have done with nursing, over the years—our relatives and loved ones will not be cared for by people who actually want to do the job. I would just like to open with that.

We have heard a lot of detailed statistics about informal carers. Across the UK, 10% of people—6.5 million—are involved in caring. In Scotland, the proportion is higher, at 17%. People often do not identify themselves. Those carers are not always the same people, because there is a turnover—a change—every year of one third, or 2.1 million people. Some of them, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, will be people caring for loved ones at the end of their life. When we lose that loved one, although we may face other challenges, we leave the informal care group, but other people take up that role. The same number of people—more than 2 million—enter and leave the role of informal carer each year.

[*Dr Philippa Whitford*]

We have heard about the cost that informal carers save the state. If we were to replace them with professional staff, the cost would be almost greater than that of the NHS, but how do we treat the people who deliver that care? A third of them live in poverty. That is because we have tangled things up so much around carer's allowance, and we never seem to have a "health in all policies" view, so on different days of the week we make decisions that absolutely counteract each other.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson)—I hope I got that right—mentioned some of the changes that have been made, including to the personal independence payment and the employment and support allowance work-related activity group. Perhaps the Government think that those changes send people back to work, but the reality is that many of the people affected, particularly where mental health or waxing and waning illnesses are involved, will not get back to work. That household will simply become more impoverished. We need to realise that that has an impact. If someone cannot afford to do things, their quality of life goes down. People who are caring—1.3 million of them for more than 50 hours a week—already have a pretty tough life without having to deal with poverty on top of everything else.

We have heard that carer's allowance is some £62 a week; it is pretty insulting that that is less than jobseeker's allowance. People tend to spend six or nine months on jobseeker's allowance, but they may depend on carer's allowance, along with other benefits, for much longer than that. To pay someone, in essence, £62 a week for the hours that they put in is derisory. In Scotland, if I may correct the hon. Member for Strangford, we are not just considering raising carer's allowance to £72 a week; that is a commitment. It will become the same as jobseeker's allowance. Even that is very much a baseline. It does not recognise what those people need.

Of course, there are people in caring situations for whom money is not an issue, because they have a pension or large amounts of savings, but they are not the generality of cases, if a third of carers are in poverty. Half of them have used up all their savings and have had to borrow. A quarter of them have had to re-mortgage their home. That all adds stress to people who contribute massively to society.

We have well over a million older carers, as the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) mentioned. What has not been mentioned in this debate is that people on retirement pension do not qualify for carer's allowance. That seems bizarre, because one of the biggest groups of carers is people who are retired. In the past, people would have been caring for a partner as they became more frail, but as people are living longer, we are retiring people who are caring for a parent, or for a parent and a partner. The hon. Member for Eastleigh spoke of caring for little ones and older ones, but we actually have people who are caring for older ones and much older ones. That is massively challenging.

At the other end, we have heard mention of young carers, who are defined as those under the age of 16. They are completely excluded from carer's allowance as it starts only at the age of 16, yet those children again play a major role and suffer major detriment. They will often be in a poor household, because the parent—as it

usually is—for whom they are caring will have suffered from the various cuts to support. Their parent may have a physical or mental illness, may suffer from addiction, or may in other ways not be the parent in the family. If 12 and 13-year-olds are carrying that burden, and cannot afford to go on a school trip, and do not have time to do the little Saturday job or paper round that allowed the rest of us to invest in the height of fashion, we are allowing their quality of life to be lowered still further.

Young adult carers are defined as being 16 to 25. If they are students, they are automatically excluded from carer's allowance, regardless of the fact that a quarter of them work more than 20 hours a week. If they work less than 35 hours a week, they do not qualify for anything. If they are official students, they qualify for nothing.

We have all these pockets of people who are working really hard, yet we as a state are offering no support to them. That is the minimum that we should be doing. They will still be doing a hard job and putting in long hours that save the country masses of money. We should all feel ashamed that they can have to choose between eating and heating, and that there are young people who have no opportunities and know that their job opportunities will be limited by going through that. Obviously, given my health background, I have looked at the health of these people, and they are twice as likely to be ill. Indeed, 8% of them are on disability living allowance as was, so we have someone who has frailty caring for someone else who has frailty.

One fifth of the people who are putting in more than 50 hours a week are not getting any services because, as has been mentioned, they do not identify themselves as carers, no one else identifies them as carers, and they have no idea where they should go to get help. I back the call that this should be part of the health service's duty. If a doctor diagnoses someone with advanced cancer or dementia, or a child with disability, they should ask, "Who are the carers here?". That is part of the primary care role in Scotland, but I am not sure what the roles are in England. Certainly, as part of the quality framework in Scotland, there must be that discussion. There is still room for improvement in our communities on that. People simply see themselves as looking after their family, but actually, they are looking after all of us.

We know that the ageing population will increase. We already have 800,000 people with dementia, who are being looked after by 670,000 carers. At the moment, 60% of us will be carers at some point. As the numbers increase, all of us must expect to spend a portion of our lives as a carer. If that always causes massive detriment to our work, our ability to do anything and our quality of life, we will have allowed the quality of life of everyone to deteriorate.

For women, there is a disproportionate hit, because 60% of carers are women, and one in four of those women will end up giving up work. As was mentioned, they end up in part-time, low-quality, low-paid jobs, and they do not get promotion. Right at the end, they get a rubbish pension, which, as we have heard in many debates in this Chamber, may be plucked out from underneath them. That is the last slap in the face. With modern technology, we should be able to have more home working and flexible working to allow people with talent and skill to remain active and have a career, even if they face a few years of having to commit to



caring for someone. As we go into the future, whether we are carers or not, as politicians we need to make sure that we provide the basic funding and services to support carers as they support those who need help.

As individuals, we need to do more in our communities. We have heard mention of carer-friendly communities. I was honoured last Saturday to be part of the launch of one of my local towns, Prestwick, as a dementia-friendly community. It was a fantastic event, and the turnout of the community at the market cross for music, food, cupcakes, fiddling and singing by the wonderful Musical Minds choir, which is made up of people with dementia, was fantastic. The community is already coming forward, and local businesses have undergone training.

Within that, we have a group called Crossroads, which supports carers and allows them little informal breaks, so that they can try to keep some of themselves. Women are used to being recognised as somebody or other's wife and somebody or other's mother once they have got past being so-and-so's daughter. The problem for somebody facing this intensity of care is that they can feel like they disappear altogether—that they as a person have no outside view at all. Their hobbies are gone and, as was mentioned earlier, their friends are gone.

It is important, not just as politicians and people in families, but as members of our communities, that we value and recognise carers if they are out and about, and accept the person they are caring for, no matter if they are a bit loud, if their wheelchair gets in the way, or if they need time to get on the bus. If we accept the person they are caring for, the carer will also feel more accepted in our communities. Basically, I call on everybody, because we all have a role to play.

**Mark Durkan** (Foyle) (SDLP): Just as we must not lose our recognition of people, or identify them just by their disability, the fact that they need care or the fact that they are carers, it is important that we recruit carers to contribute to thinking on public policy—and not just when it relates to care issues; often, carers are disfranchised and disconnected from society because of their caring commitments. All of us at all political levels need to do more to engage carers, so that they contribute to a range of public policies.

**Dr Whitford:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. I refer him back to the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) about the Carers Parliament in Scotland, which looks at young carers, young adult carers and older carers. When they consult, the Scottish Government make great efforts to pluck people out of the voluntary world to come and tell them how it really is, because unless we hear how it really is, we are not going to fix it.

We all have a duty, including the Government, to look more at health in all policies. We cannot fix everything, but we should not be adding poverty on top of all carers' other challenges.

2.38 pm

**Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate on carers. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating

time for the debate and the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) for the thoughtful way in which she opened it.

There have been some interesting and thoughtful contributions from hon. Members. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman), the hon. Members for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson), for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). We also heard briefly from the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) and my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) and for Foyle (Mark Durkan).

There are more than 6.5 million carers in the UK. We have all used different figures in the debate, but I tend to use that one. In my constituency, there are nearly 11,000 carers. I have known ever since I became a Member of Parliament that many of them have a heavy workload due to the ill health in my constituency.

In many areas of the country, people are living longer. As the population ages, we are living with increasingly complex care needs. Three in five of us will become carers—the hon. Member for Eastleigh touched on that. There are also more older carers. In England and Wales, almost 1.3 million people aged over 65 give unpaid care to a family member or friend. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) spoke about the fact that, between 2001 and 2011, the number of carers who are over 85 increased from 38,000 to more than 87,000. More than half of carers aged over 85 give 50 hours or more of care every week. That is certainly something to think about.

We are failing to address key issues for carers. Inadequate support for carers and the people they care for damages carers' quality of life. I will argue that Ministers must do more to recognise the importance of carers and to put in place policies to address their needs.

First, many carers continue to suffer financial hardship because of their caring responsibilities. As we have heard, a recent report by the New Policy Institute found that 1.2 million carers are in poverty. It is shocking to think that so many carers are struggling to make ends meet. In the Carers UK report, "State of Caring 2016", half the carers surveyed reported cutting back on essentials such as food and heating. Others are having to borrow money, and more than a third use their own savings. The hon. Member for Strangford raised those issues. I feel very strongly that no carer should be pushed into poverty because of their caring responsibilities. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Workington for talking about financial hardship among carers. It is an increasing problem.

Secondly, too many carers are left to cope on their own with little or no support. As we have heard, one in five of the carers who give 50 hours or more of care each week receive no practical support with their caring role. More needs to be done to protect carers' health and wellbeing. We must ensure that carers are identified at the earliest possible stage so that they can find the help and support they need. As I said earlier, in the past

[Barbara Keeley]

I have introduced private Members' Bills to place a duty on GPs and NHS bodies to identify carers and ensure that they are referred for support. The last time I introduced such a Bill, the coalition Government did not support it. However, that duty on the NHS to identify carers was included as a pledge in Labour's manifesto in 2015.

The Government have promised a new carers strategy to give carers

"the support they need to live well while caring for a family member or friend."

However, to achieve that aim, any new strategy must include a duty on GPs and NHS bodies to identify carers. After all, the NHS is nearly always the first point of contact for carers as they begin caring, and so is best placed to identify them. I welcome the support of the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle for a vital change that we can make for carers.

Thirdly, I want to talk about the chronic underfunding of social care and the impact on carers. I have raised that many times with the care Minister and most recently with the Chancellor. In the previous Parliament, there were five years of funding reductions for adult social care, totalling £4.6 billion. Local authority spending on social care for older people fell in real terms by 17%, even as the number of people aged 85 and over rose by 9%. Three hundred thousand fewer older people receive publicly funded adult social care now compared with 2009. In the Carers UK survey, 60% of carers who had seen a change in the amount of support they received said that that support had been reduced due to cost or availability.

I hope that the care Minister will not repeat the Chancellor's mantra about the 2% social care precept and the increases in the better care fund arriving by 2019-20. The 2% social care precept is inadequate to meet even the Government's minimum wage policy. In my local area of Salford, the cost of paying increases in the national minimum wage in the care sector will be £2.7 million, but the 2% social care precept will raise only £1.6 million. In effect, the council tax payers of my local area are paying for that Government policy of increasing the national minimum wage. The Minister knows that there is no increase in the better care fund this year and only £105 million extra next year. It is hard to understand why Ministers have refused the reasonable request from the Local Government Association to bring forward £700 million of better care funding to address the financial pressures that it faces this year and next year.

We know that there are real concerns about the financial viability of many of our social care providers. In evidence this week to the Public Accounts Committee inquiry on discharging older people from acute hospitals, the president of the Association of Directors of Adult Social Care, Harold Bodmer, said that the sustainability of the residential care and domiciliary care sectors was the main concern for social services directors. He also pointed to significant regional differences. He said:

"I wouldn't underestimate the impact of the differential effect on the social care market in different parts of the country, because there isn't a domiciliary care problem in the north-east, but there is in parts of Hertfordshire, Oxfordshire and Norfolk. It is really difficult to get domiciliary care in north Norfolk."

I thank the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire for talking about home care not being valued. It may be that people in parts of the country where they cannot get domiciliary care are voting with their feet. People do not want to work in a sector that does not value or pay them properly. Home care should be a much more valued role.

I have real concerns that this fragility in care provision could leave more people without adequate care and put more pressure on unpaid family carers. This is worrying because more people are already providing care for more hours than ever before: 1.4 million people now give more than 50 hours of unpaid care a week, and that number is rising faster than the increase in the general population of carers. There has been an increase of 25% in people caring more than 50 hours a week in the past 10 years compared with an increase of just 11% in the total number of carers.

The Care Act 2014 entitles all carers to a timely assessment of their needs. However, one in three carers who have had an assessment in the past year had to wait six months or longer for it. Worryingly, nearly 40% of carers caring for someone at the end of life also had to wait six months or more for an assessment. That is unacceptable. Carers for people at the end of life should be prioritised. We have talked about that in different meetings here.

Timely assessments are surely one of the starting points in providing support to carers, but even when carer assessments take place it seems that they do not properly address carers' needs. Almost 70% of carers in the Carers UK survey felt that their need to have regular breaks from caring was not considered in their assessment. Members have rightly repeatedly referred to the importance of breaks for carers. Seventy-four per cent. of working age carers did not feel that the support they needed to juggle care with work was sufficiently considered. We need those important assessments to be more than box-ticking exercises, but that can happen only if the Government invest in support for carers and give local authorities the resources that they need to provide care and support. I hope that hon. Members have been able to meet and listen to a number of carers this week—indeed, I understand from the debate that that is already happening.

At the carers week parliamentary event I met Katy Styles, who cares for her husband Mark, and she told me about a number of issues that she has encountered as a carer for a person with motor neurone disease. What I felt most in talking to Katy was that she wanted to be recognised and listened to as a carer, but she also raised issues of financial hardship. Katy and Mark Styles told their story to the all-party group on motor neurone disease, and Katy said:

"We told them about how we were once two professionals and how our lives had been devastated by Mark's condition. I explained that as a teacher I had earned £150 a day and now I receive £62.10 a week in carer's allowance for providing never-ending care and support for my husband. Mark explained how he was forced to retire at 46, that our income had fallen off a cliff, but our bills continued to increase. He told the group about how we travel miles and miles to receive care, and how we had to make adaptations to our home which were paid for with savings that we will never be able to replace."

The MND Association found in its survey that more than half of carers for people with MND care for more than 100 hours per week, yet only a third have had a

carer's assessment, and four out of 10 people were unaware of their right to one. Caring for more hours each week can mean carers having to give up work and facing financial hardship, and we have touched on that in this debate. Some 2.3 million adults in the UK have given up work to care, and almost 3 million have reduced their working hours.

I do not want to leave the issue of financial hardship without mentioning women born in the 1950s who are carers, but who are now not getting their state pension until later in their 60s. I have spoken about carers such as Marian, who has given up work at the age of 62 to look after her mother and her brother, both of whom have dementia. Her only source of income is a small private pension of £2,500, and her husband will have to support her until she gets her state pension at 65. The Minister has probably not been involved in many of the debates on the state pension age, but many women born in the 1950s are in such a situation and now face financial hardship.

We have mentioned those who give up work to care or who struggle to manage their working hours, and about combining care with work, and the feeling in the debate has been that more needs to be done to ensure that employers provide carers with enough support. Some companies are leaders in providing support for their staff who are carers. For example, Centrica offers flexible working, access to counsellors, and an employee-led carers network that is supported by the company's senior leadership. Its carer's leave policy offers up to one month matched paid leave per year to help with caring responsibilities, and it also takes into account that caring responsibilities may fall to people who are not immediate family members.

I have concerns that members of this House are not able to provide those levels of support. IPSA contracts for Members' staff offer only five days' leave for caring reasons, and even that is stated as being for emergencies and dependants only. That minimal policy does not reflect good practice—the Minister will know what that is—and we could do better for our staff. I invite the Minister, the hon. Member for Eastleigh and others who have raised that issue, to join me in talking to IPSA to request a change in that policy. It is not good enough not to have better practice when supporting our staff who are carers.

As has been said, carers week is an important annual event because it provides us with an opportunity to recognise the contribution that carers make to society, and to highlight the challenges they face. I thank all organisations that support carers and provide hon. Members with so much information about caring issues: Carers UK, Age UK, Carers Trust, Independent Age, Macmillan Cancer Support, the MND Association, and the Multiple Sclerosis Society. My constituency contains the excellent Salford Carers Centre, and an amazing group of young carers are supported by the young carers project. I look forward to meeting them tomorrow. I also thank Marie Curie, which launched a report on end-of-life care for LGBT people in the House yesterday, as well as Together for Short Lives and the Rainbow Trust Charity for their support for children with life-limiting conditions and their families. Finally, I thank the UK's 6.5 million carers, and especially the 11,000 carers in my constituency, for the essential

role that they play in supporting our health and care system. Carers need and deserve so much more respect and support than they are currently given.

2.53 pm

**The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) on securing this debate and on the way she opened it, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this important debate during carers week. I will start where the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) ended, and thank all those who are involved in caring in our society. As we have heard from every speaker, carers make an invaluable contribution to the UK that we could not do without, and perhaps I can illustrate that by citing some of the remarks made by colleagues during the debate.

I will touch on some of the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh in the remarks I have prepared for this debate, and I will also comment on her other points. She started with a graphic description of what might happen if carers were not around and if they decided not to do what they do every day, which brought the point home to us. She spoke about how people become a carer, and said that it could happen to any of us at any time. At last year's national care awards I remember watching a video in which the point was made vividly that any of us in that hotel room could become a carer within 24 hours, and we can all understand that. As others pointed out, carers are no longer a minority group but people we all know—many of us are closely connected to carers, if not carers ourselves—and we are all only going to become more closely involved in the future. She, like others, made that point very well.

My hon. Friend also spoke, as did others, about the need to identify people not solely as carers but as husbands, wives, partners, employees—everything else they still are—and about the great danger of someone being pigeonholed because they have become a carer. It is important to remember that someone does not lose their identity when they become a carer. Hon. Members also highlighted the importance of carers week. I am proud to be the president of Carers in Bedfordshire—I have been for some years—and I thank it for its work. All hon. Members have thanked their local groups.

My hon. Friend was not the only colleague to speak of her personal experiences of caring. As I have mentioned from the Dispatch Box before, the range of Members' experiences goes far beyond what the media are keen to portray and touches on virtually all aspects of life outside. When I hear the cares and experiences that colleagues bring to this place, I always hope that people outside read our debates and understand a bit more about us, why we want to be representatives in Parliament and the personal experiences we bring.

The hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) and others spoke about finances, on which subject I could spend the whole 15 or 20 minutes. I know that this subject is particularly important to the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South, the spokesperson for the Opposition. On carers allowance, which the hon. Member for Workington focused on, the Government keep the earnings limit under review and keep under consideration whether an increase is warranted and affordable. The

[*Alistair Burt*]

increase of 8% in 2015 far outstripped the increase in wages. The earnings limit is currently £110 a week, but that is a net figure, and if allowable expenses, such as childcare and pension contributions, are deducted, a claimant might earn significantly more. The limit enables a carer to maintain some contact with the employment market and achieve greater financial independence, but I recognise and would not minimise the constant financial pressures and difficulties facing families. The limit is kept under review. Also, as I said, there is a wider review of the carers strategy, which has allowed a lot of people to make contributions on finance, not just the amount but the important interlinking of benefits. That point will not be missed, and I thank her for raising the matter.

**Barbara Keeley:** Carers charities often raise with us the link with things such as the national minimum wage. The Minister talked about the figure last year, but the national minimum wage changed in April, and many of the carers trying to keep a part-time job going will be at that level, so it seems sensible to link the threshold with the national minimum wage so that when the national minimum wage increases, so does the threshold.

**Alistair Burt:** I cannot make that specific commitment, but I understand fully the hon. Lady's point. As I said before, the earnings limit and all the factors affecting it are kept constantly under review, but I am sure that Treasury colleagues will not have missed the remarks made today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) also made the point about carers not being a small minority. She commended Carers in Wiltshire, and I commend her for being a volunteer—another example of the experience we all bring to this debate—and she raised the important issue of entitlement to benefits and signposting. In our call for evidence as part of the review of the carers strategy, respondents raised the importance of people being directed towards the things they need as soon as possible. The moment someone becomes a carer, their world changes, and they need as much information as possible at that time. She was right to mention the importance of signposting in particular. She spoke with great passion on the subject.

The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson), who also spoke from personal experience, made a point about access to work. I shall talk about employment later, but she made her point strongly, and again she was not the only person to recognise that, although we all wish for a world in which burdens are shared equally, in truth they are not. Women carry the biggest burden when it comes to caring, and will probably continue to do so for some time. Recognising the extra pressures on women is particularly important. The hon. Lady made that point very well.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) was particularly helpful in saying that although it is carers week for us, it is just another week for carers. I also liked it when he said that it was a week to talk “with”, not “to” carers. That was a particularly well made point. He spoke forcefully about the reality of life—the sleepless nights and other issues that carers experience.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) brought up the issue of care homes. I am not going to linger on that subject, but, as some colleagues know, I am particularly exercised about safety in care homes. It is my belief that someone in the care of the state, whether it be the NHS, local authorities or anyone else, needs to be as safe in a care home, a mental health institution or in learning disability facilities as they would be in an intensive care unit. As I expressed in yesterday's debate about Southern Health, that is simply not the case.

I am very conscious of issues surrounding care homes. I have a round-table meeting on Monday with those responsible for the monitoring and regulation of care homes, and I pay tribute to the Care Quality Commission and others who are trying to do a good job of regulation, but this also involves some of the groups that are critical of regulation, want to see more done and want to ensure that there is safety in care homes. Some of the stories of abuse that we read about in the papers need to become fewer and fewer until they are extinct.

I want to praise the National Care Association because there are many good care homes, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle said. It is important to keep the right balance in recognising the quality of good homes without minimising the pressures on them. When things that should not be happening are going on, it is quite difficult to maintain that balance. I appreciate the fact that my hon. Friend mentioned this important issue. I commend, too, the ideas coming forward from the carers team in East Sussex, and I urge members to ensure that the ideas put to my hon. Friend will be put into our national call for evidence. They have until the end of this month to do so. I do not envisage a statutory instrument to extend that still further, should there be a rush of evidence at the end of the month, but we never know in the present circumstances. Getting that information in would be very helpful.

The hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) was not the only one to refer to the pressures on our own caseworkers, who do so much work to look after people in the House. I appreciated his mention of that point. He hoped that the carers strategy would be a long-term strategy. I hope it will, too. The strategy should be reviewed from time to time—this is the first review for two or three years—and that is certainly the aim. That is why I would like the strategy to look slightly beyond the immediate and consider how to build for the future rather than simply having a snapshot now.

My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I call him my hon. Friend—is exceptionally generous and courteous to all Front-Bench Members when he speaks. I would like to tell him how much that is appreciated—it really is—when he is so genuine in expressing his views. He spoke of his personal experiences, pressures in Northern Ireland and the Crossroads young carers in Newtownards who particularly stressed the difficulties faced by young carers and the things that they often miss out on. My hon. Friend spoke about a singing group. A few weeks ago, I went to Biggleswade at the request of the Alzheimer's Society to join a singing group, and I sang some songs with the people there. It was certainly an uplifting experience that morning. I commend those groups and the carers who work with them.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) made a considered and thoughtful contribution, as usual. She spoke about all the financial pressures. Particularly telling was her comment that although there are a relatively fixed number of carers and although it is steadily growing to 6.5 million, it is a replaceable 6.5 million and about a third leave for all sorts of reasons.

On bereaved carers, I was contacted through Twitter by someone in that position who asked whether the strategy and review would cover them, and I answered “Yes, it will and it should”. The moment that caring for someone stops because of bereavement, the carer’s life has changed—perhaps in an anticipated way, but it is still changed. Caring for people in those circumstances is really important. We must not forget this group, so I greatly appreciated what the hon. Lady said. She also spoke of the need to ensure that social care is seen as a profession as much as nursing and domiciliary care are throughout the NHS and elsewhere, and I thoroughly agree with her.

The hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), whose background in caring requires her to be listened to seriously every time she speaks about this issue, made a number of comments. I shall deal with the subject of finance a little later. Let me say first that I will ensure that the review that we are conducting will cover early identification in the NHS. We are trying to ensure that it takes place earlier and earlier. The issue of GP identification is very important, and I am pleased that the hon. Lady raised it again.

**Barbara Keeley:** I should be happy to send the Minister a copy of my Bill and the explanatory notes if that would help to elucidate the points that we have made.

**Alistair Burt:** I have no doubt that those are already deep within the recesses of the Department of Health, but if it would speed things up and provide encouragement, I should be grateful if the hon. Lady did indeed do that.

The hon. Lady also made an important point about our staff in the House. She said that we should look after them. I appreciate the point that she made about the staff of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, and I will look into how we can best ensure that we recognise properly—in line with best employment practice elsewhere—that those who work for us bear considerable burdens of caring from time to time.

I am grateful for the opportunity to come to the House and share the important work that is under way to develop a new cross-Government strategy for carers. I continue to be humbled by the many powerful, honest and informed contributions that we have heard throughout the afternoon from Members who have described the carers whom they know and represent, as well as their personal experiences. Those views, and the many others that we have received so far, will be fully taken into account as the Department works with Government colleagues, stakeholders and, crucially, carers themselves to develop the new strategy.

Today we have been reminded that behind the statistics stand spouses, partners, parents—in fact, all manner of relatives, friends and neighbours—who are providing care right now in our communities. Their commitment can scarcely be quantified or questioned, and we must ensure that our own commitment to support people is demonstrated clearly as well.

I pay tribute to the national care awards, which are sponsored by LloydsPharmacy, Carers UK and *The Sun*. I was at the awards ceremony a couple of weeks ago, and we met the winners at lunchtime. The Prime Minister was kind enough to offer No. 10 Downing Street for a lunchtime reception, and we took people round. We are always struck when people like that say that it is a privilege to be there. We say to them, “No, it is our privilege that you are here with us. It is the other way round.” Those people were a great group—great winners. We went to a dinner that night. Radio 2 was very good: there is always a table of wonderful people to support the awards. When we hear the personal stories—which have been reflected in some of what we have heard in the House today—we are all immensely impressed. Let me again pay tribute to those awards: they do one of the jobs that we have all been speaking about this afternoon—valuing and recognising carers for what they do in so many different circumstances.

Before we go any further, may I offer a small philosophical comment? I picked this up from a piece in *The Guardian* by a writer called Madeleine Bunting. I do not read *The Guardian* all the time, contrary to the belief of many of my colleagues, but every now and again I am struck by something that is really good, and what Madeleine Bunting wrote is important. She was writing about what care is. We talk about it—we talk about the facts and figures and the finance here in the House—but what is it precisely, and where is it going? Madeleine Bunting wrote:

“We recognise instantly when we experience it: an interaction that acknowledges a moment of human connection. It may be brief, but it expresses and confirms a common humanity, a recognition of the individual—and always involves a particular quality of attention.

But the characteristics needed to provide this kind of care are losing cultural traction. Attentiveness requires two crucial ingredients: patience and the willingness to put one’s own preoccupations aside and to be available to another. Yet in a myriad of ways we are all being groomed by consumerism and digital media—to be the opposite: impatient and self-preoccupied. That impatience makes us easily distractable, addicted to the next stimulus.”

I think that Madeleine Bunting was making a really important point. The people about whom we have been talking have avoided that: they have patience, and a commitment to others that is beyond many of us. However, there is concern about society—concern about where it is going and the pressures that it is under. Demographics suggest that we will need more care, and yet certain pressures are making it more difficult for that to be realised. What will carers be like in the future if they have become too distracted and too self-occupied? That is not the case with carers now, but it is a valid point to raise with regard to the future.

We owe a duty of care to this vast army of people, who show their patience and their compassion for others. I am talking about not just providing them with the support, tools and information that they need to care well, but ensuring that their own health, wellbeing and life goals are not compromised. Our respect is unreserved, but respect is not enough. We must never lose sight of that fact if a new carer strategy is to succeed.

I should say at this point that I do not wish to paint a negative picture of caring. Although personal sacrifices are made each and every day, many carers have told us that it remains a privilege to care, and that they have a strong desire to repay the kindness of others. Indeed,

[Alistair Burt]

carers derive immense satisfaction and peace of mind from being the primary source of comfort and reassurance for friends and loved ones. However, that satisfaction must not be at the expense of carers' own mental and physical health.

We have also heard this afternoon about the great diversity in types of caring. There is no such thing as a typical carer—carers are people of all ages and from all walks of life, and those for whom they care have different needs. In particular, we neglect at our peril the needs of children and young people with caring obligations. They are most at risk of having not just their health and wellbeing compromised, but their education and career ambitions too.

There is no “one size fits all”. We must be alert to that as we attempt to craft new and improved support for all those providing care in our communities. It is no surprise that one in six of us is currently caring. As lifespans extend and our population grows, caring for others has already become part of the fabric of our lives. All those who have spoken today have made it clear that they are not affected by the lazy mindset that tells us that carers are other people; carers are all of us. As a constituency MP, I have had the privilege of visiting carers and carers' groups in Bedfordshire. As a Minister, I have spoken to carers' groups in relation to pulling together the new carers strategy. I strongly commend those who work in my own county.

Almost 20 years after the Carers Act 1995 first gave official acknowledgement to those providing “regular and substantial” care, the Care Act 2014 now gives carers new rights, including parity of assessment, advice and support with those for whom they care. Those new rights are a historic step forward. We have provided local authorities with £433 million in 2016-17 for new burdens arising from the Act.

We know that the Care Act is taking time to bed in. The hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South referred to the matters that affect assessment, and I understand them very well. Care varies from place to place. A group from the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services working with the Department is looking at those variations in care, so that in places where assessments are much slower than in others, we are looking at what can be done and how things can be improved. That is very much on our mind.

**Barbara Keeley:** Having been present during discussions about certain groups of carers, perhaps the Minister will tell us whether he believes that carers of people who are at end of life should be prioritised for assessment. It is pointless to have people waiting six months when the person for whom they care may have only a few weeks or a few months to live.

**Alistair Burt:** I will ensure that that is considered as an important point of the assessment. I will write to the hon. Lady in relation to that.

Let me turn to finance now. There is always concern about the amount of finance that is available. It is almost impossible to get the right amount. By spending around £2.5 billion a year on benefits in Great Britain, benefiting more than three-quarters of a million carers, we are trying to respond to the needs that are there.

That money provides a measure of financial support and recognition for people who give up the opportunity of full-time employment in order to provide care. As I said earlier, those allowances remain constantly under review. As this debate has made clear, it is not just about finance, but about all the other things, including supporting young carers and making sure that they are not forgotten and remembering that employers play an important part. I commend NHS England for the important work that it has done in relation to carers and for its commitment to carers.

I also want to mention the results that our call for evidence has produced, just to give people some assurance that these things are on our minds. We have received 3,800 responses so far, 85% of which are from carers themselves. A great number of the responses have been candid and honest, and it will frighten my officials if I read them out. They describe financial hardship; a lack of recognition and involvement; the impact on carers' health and wellbeing; the difficulty of maintaining life outside caring; and frustration with access to assessments and services. All these issues are on our minds.

The need to ensure that carers get the recognition they deserve has been well illustrated in the compassionate speeches that we have heard today. Carers are vital, and not just in carers week. There is also a young carers awareness day—it was on 27 January this year—sponsored by the Carers Trust. I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) for holding a round-table about carers recently. This matter is on the minds of everyone in the House and I appreciate the courtesy of hon. Members in giving their time to deal with this important issue this afternoon.

3.15 pm

**Mims Davies:** Thank you for allowing me a few more moments to speak at the end of this important debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. I want to thank all Members for their thoughtful and helpful contributions today. I also want to thank the Minister for his characteristically compassionate and understanding comments on the carers strategy and for taking on board the comments that have been made across the Chamber. I am grateful for the wide-ranging comments from those on the Opposition Benches, who have also been most helpful.

Carer signposting is vital. Recognition by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority is also vital—a point that came up yesterday with the staff in my own office. I have also had women who were born in the 1950s coming to see me in my constituency about their roles as carers resulting in financial hardship. I also spoke about my own personal experiences of caring, which resulted in some challenging financial times and a drop in the quality of life. I therefore never underestimate the financial challenges that face carers and their tenacity in making ends meet. That is always astonishing.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) for talking about the brilliant work being done in her constituency and for championing the “Walk a mile in my shoes” event. That is absolutely the right way to manage these things. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) said that “carer” was just too small a word to describe such a big role. She also mentioned the variations in the different work that people do. The hon. Member

for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) talked about carers week being more than just a congratulatory event, and said that it was about identifying needs and opportunities for change. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) highlighted the need to look after carers and to allow them to have breaks. His own family provided a fine example of that. The hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) spoke powerfully about the wonderful success of carers week in Northern Ireland and about the measures that should be adopted. I have scrawled something here about joined-up thinking. It is easy to say those three words. If only we could achieve it sometimes!

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) characteristically picked up on many of the points made by other Members around the Chamber, particularly those relating to hidden carers. I have been contacted by people on Twitter and Facebook who have been listening to or watching the debate today—some people have also been messaging me—to say that they now realise that they are hidden carers. Perhaps they are looking after someone with vascular dementia, for example, and this is having an impact on their lives, day in, day out. Others have spoken about the effect of looking after children and other family members.

I welcome this opportunity for Members to talk about end-of-life care, which is a really important time for carers. It can involve financial pressures, costs, poverty, stress, borrowing, and perhaps re-mortgaging or losing a cherished home as the impact of the situation bites. We have also talked about the issues affecting student

carers and young carers, and I am reminded particularly of the issues that come in weekly to our caseworkers, who deal with them so well.

In my summing up, I was also feeling slightly philosophical, like the Minister. Theodore Roosevelt said that people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care. I thought of one of the last conversations I had with my dad before he died. I was in the hospital, helping him to bathe and go to the toilet, and he said to me, “Did you ever think that you would be looking after your old dad like this?” and I said to him, “I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Caring may be the most challenging, boring, difficult, monotonous or heart-breaking role, particularly at that end-of-life stage, but carers will never regret being there and doing it. Caring is a challenge, but carers look back and relish the fact that they made those last few moments and times better. Carers, we recognise and salute you today. You are special and a true carers army.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered carers.

#### ADJOURNMENT

*Resolved,* That this House do now adjourn.—(*Julian Smith.*)

3.20 pm

*House adjourned.*





# Westminster Hall

Thursday 9 June 2016

[SIR DAVID AMESS *in the Chair*]

## Stillbirth

1.30 pm

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered stillbirth.

I am grateful that I was able to secure this debate today. I know that I am not alone in this place in having direct or indirect experience of the very important issue of stillbirth. I will not attempt to put into words what going through this experience does to those who are left to pick up the pieces. There are no words to describe the pain and, normally, I am a pretty private person. However, I realised that, if I am going to campaign to help to improve this situation, I must speak out and use my experience to make things better, if I can.

Too many people suffer horrendously through stillbirth, but they suffer in silence. I am an MP and I believe that I have a duty to speak up for all those people who feel that they have no voice and that no one cares or understands. I want to work with others to make things better.

Stillbirth is not inevitable; it is not something that just happens. In my case, after five years of IVF treatment and one miscarriage, I experienced what all the medical professionals with whom I came into contact called a “textbook pregnancy”. I was glowing, in rude health and despite my small frame I was carrying a huge baby by the time my pregnancy came to an end. However, what I did not know, and what the medical professionals failed to pick up, was that I was suffering from HELLP syndrome, a form of pre-eclampsia. Apparently, it had been showing up in my blood tests for some time but that was repeatedly missed.

I was returned home, after I arrived at hospital on my due date, as previously arranged, with my hospital bag and ready to be admitted. The great discomfort that I felt—pronounced pain through my whole body—was dismissed as the usual discomfort that comes with late pregnancy. Having returned home, almost immediately, I had to go back to the hospital, where I was kept waiting for over an hour and a half and told that I was being a nuisance. Again, I was told to return home, but my husband refused to allow that to happen. It transpired that, if I had indeed returned home, I would most certainly have died.

As it was, I was sent to a bed with extremely bad grace and administered with high doses of morphine. My baby died overnight. No blood was checked, no monitoring took place and no doctor examined me. The next morning, after my baby was found to have died, doctors wondered why my body would not co-operate as they tried to induce labour. While they waited 48 hours to discuss this, my liver ruptured and I started having fits. My husband was told that I was unlikely to survive.

The reason I tell this story is that the failings in my care are far more common than they should be.

Unfortunately, my case is very far from unique, particularly in one significant way. Work undertaken by Sands, the stillbirth and neonatal death charity, showed the importance of listening to mothers’ concerns about their babies. Forty-five per cent. of parents who experienced a stillbirth felt that something was wrong before the medical problem was diagnosed. Too many women are told that their concerns are unfounded and sent home, only for their baby to die soon afterwards. One simple change is for antenatal care to become more collaborative. Listen to mothers’ concerns; women know their own bodies.

To this day, Greater Glasgow and Clyde health board has not admitted that anything went wrong with my care. There has been no apology; apparently, it just happened. When I was discharged from hospital, it was agreed that an investigation into my care would take place and that any lessons that could be learned would be learned. At that point, I—like so many others before me—naively thought that that would happen. How else could the system improve?

Eighteen months later, after repeated phone calls, I received a one-page summary telling me, in language so vague and non-committal that I barely understood it, that the case had been looked at and lessons had been learned. At that point, and with extreme reluctance, I sought medical advice.

From that moment, Greater Glasgow and Clyde health board fought like a caged lion to cover its back to abdicate responsibility, which I realised it had, in fact, been doing all along. However, unlike so many other women, I was in a position to commission two independent reports from experts: Dr Shaxted, a consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist; and Dr Benjamin Stenson, a consultant neonatologist from Edinburgh. Quite frankly, they were astonished at the extraordinary, repeated and glaring errors in the care I received.

Many people would have walked away, and I know many people indeed have walked away, crushed by a system that compounds the huge loss suffered by refusing to accept when mistakes have been made, much less learn from them. I fought on because it was the only way I had of showing that my little boy mattered. I could not allow the loss of my son to be swept aside, ignored and dismissed, as though it were an incident of no importance.

People come to their MPs when they feel powerless, when their own efforts to solve a difficult situation in which they find themselves have failed. People often come to their MP when they cannot make themselves heard when dealing with an institution or organisation that refuses to listen to them, and crushes them beneath its weight. I know how that feels. That is why today I feel privileged to be in a position to offer help to some of my constituents when they feel that sense of powerlessness.

After I was elected as an MP, it seemed to me that the Greater Glasgow and Clyde health board became more interested in settling this case, which had dragged on for more than six years and with no apparent end in sight. I was offered a nominal sum, which I instinctively wanted to refuse. What I wanted was what I had wanted on the day I walked out of the hospital. I wanted an apology and I wanted to see some kind of evidence that work had been done to help to ensure that such mistakes would be much less likely to reoccur.

[*Patricia Gibson*]

However, my choice was to take the sum offered, or face the real possibility of a judge awarding me the same amount or less, which in practice would have meant that I would be liable for all costs incurred by both parties. Bankruptcy beckoned, and the Greater Glasgow and Clyde health board was allowed to sweep the entire matter under the carpet, at a time of its choosing and without a backward glance after dragging out the entire process for more than six years. No liability was admitted, and as far as the Greater Glasgow and Clyde health board is concerned there is no case to answer. How is that justice? How can others who have suffered similarly have confidence in a system such as this, and confidence that similar mistakes will not be repeated? Since I have spoken out, many people have contacted me to tell me their own shockingly similar stories.

We know that many stillbirths are avoidable, although it is also true that in some cases we do not even know why such a death has occurred, and I applaud Sands for the work it does to raise funds for research in this area. Governments across the UK must commit the necessary funding to help us to understand more about unexplained stillbirths.

It is thought that around 50% of stillbirths cannot be explained by medical professionals. However, let us be clear—not knowing why around 50% of stillbirths occur does not mean that they are inevitable. The fact is that the majority of unexplained stillbirths occur in low-risk pregnancies. That suggests that routine antenatal monitoring is failing to identify babies at risk, even though such monitoring could save their lives. Around 50% of stillbirths can be explained and much can be done to raise awareness and increase monitoring to help to mitigate risk factors.

**Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): First, may I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and on the courageous way that she has raised this important issue? [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

Does my hon. Friend agree that sometimes there is a case for a coroner’s inquiry into babies who are said to be stillborn? My sister lost her son, Hamish Kinghorn, and because he was said to be stillborn there could not be a coroner’s inquiry, despite the fact that there were NHS failings during the labour process. It is a difficult job, but that could be one way that can bring succour to the mother, in this case, my sister. This is obviously one of many cases that my hon. Friend is hearing about.

**Patricia Gibson**: I thank my hon. Friend for those comments. I will talk about the intervention of coroners in a little more detail but, in principle, I agree: there must be a role for coroners in the process.

With greater awareness, parents will be able to make more informed choices about their health and pregnancy care. As with most health issues, social inequalities are a factor. The truth is we are failing to properly identify many babies who are at risk. We lack knowledge, data and research into why babies die.

To put the figures into context, every year around 6,500 babies die before or shortly after birth. That is one baby every hour and a half—the equivalent of 16 jumbo jets crashing every year. Some 4,000 are

stillborn and another 2,500 die within a month of birth. Although some work has been done, it is not unfair to say that there has been no significant reduction in the death rates in the past 10 years. There is still a taboo around stillbirth. Folk don’t like to mention it. They don’t know how. It creates discomfort and awkwardness. It is not like other deaths, is it? You cannot talk about shared memories of the lost baby. That leads to those suffering the loss feeling abandoned and isolated. Life must continue behind what is very often a fragile mask of normality.

Thinking of our own lives, almost all of us will know someone who has had a stillbirth or whose baby has died shortly after birth. However, the tragedies are too often hidden. Road traffic accidents kill around 3,000 people each year. Twice as many babies as that die, and still it barely appears on the agenda. Sands research showed that 75% of the public were very surprised by the numbers of stillbirths. There was more concern about cot death and Down’s syndrome, yet stillbirth is much more common. I think that it is not a political priority because it is considered unfashionable. It is not talked about generally and it is even more difficult for people to talk about when they have experienced it.

Will the Minister give assurances that the practice of trusts investigating themselves when things go wrong will be reconsidered? I have formally written to the Scottish Government’s Cabinet Secretary for Health, Shona Robison MSP, to ask for similar consideration to be given to that issue in terms of health boards in Scotland. Ideally, an independent body should complete investigations into alleged failings in care within a specified timeframe. That would prevent long-drawn out investigations or, worse still, legal processes. In my case, those lasted more than six years.

Experts in the field are unequivocal when they tell us with one voice that for otherwise healthy babies to die undelivered near term is an easily avoidable event. In answer to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), I find myself persuaded by the case put forward by the Campaign for Safer Births that coroners should have the power to hold an inquest for babies who die during labour or are stillborn at full term, which is from 37 weeks on. Coroners currently have no jurisdiction to hold inquests into such deaths.

In my case, Dr Stenson noted “with disappointment” that there was a record in my notes that I did not want a post-mortem performed on my son. He went on to point out that there was no record to indicate who spoke to me or what information I was given. I may or may not have had such a conversation. Quite frankly, I cannot remember, as much of my time in hospital was spent under extremely heavy sedation in a critical care unit and then a high dependency unit. Why was the conversation not had with me when I was more alert? Why was it not properly recorded? I cannot say what my response would have been, but I had no opportunity to make a measured assessment of the relative merits or otherwise of such an important decision. Is that not odd? Is it likely to be unusual? I doubt it very much.

That is what has helped persuade me that coroners should be involved in such decisions. It would mean that particular trends could be noted, informing training needs and highlighting serious failings. It would ultimately help the NHS to deliver what we all want: higher-quality

maternity care. Coroners would be in a position to issue a prevention of future deaths report that hospitals must follow to prevent similar mistakes occurring.

In Scotland, 34% of all stillbirths occur at 37 weeks and beyond. The figure for England and Wales stands at 33%. Those figures are truly dreadful and are a national disgrace. The North Ayrshire and Arran health board has a higher rate of stillbirth than the UK average. It comes second in a list of 21 health boards across the UK given red light warnings for high stillbirth and newborn death rates. That causes me alarm, as I know it does for my constituents. Scotland ranks 31st out of 33 high-income countries in the world on this issue. Although international comparisons are difficult—definitions of stillbirth can vary—it is still an appalling statistic.

It is too late to save my little boy. There will be other little boys and girls as eagerly awaited as my baby who are yet to be born. We can do much more in Scotland and across the UK to take action to ensure they have the safest possible care. I urge the Minister to reflect seriously on the suggestions I have put forward. I will also be urging Scotland's own Cabinet Secretary for Health to continue to work to improve maternity care. We cannot go on allowing 100 babies to die each and every week. It is time that the issue was put firmly on the political agenda. Tears and hand-wringing will not save our babies. Action and political will can. I urge the Minister to take action.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Sir David Amess (in the Chair):** I have been advised that there are five colleagues who wish to speak. The concluding speeches will start at 2.30 pm. Perhaps the other colleagues who have taken the time to be here may be minded to make interventions.

1.46 pm

**John Howell (Henley) (Con):** I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing the debate. She has spoken with great passion from a personal perspective. We have all been moved by what she has said. It was very powerful.

I want to make a short contribution on behalf of a constituent and a member of my family. My constituent wrote to me to tell me about how she lost her first child to stillbirth:

“This life altering event has led to us being placed into a world we never knew existed. Sadly, the baby loss taboo leaves many unsupported and prevention affected.”

She has been trying to get information from her clinical commissioning group on what is happening to ensure that such things do not happen again and that more women can be protected. What she has got back from the CCG so far has been a general statement of Government policy, which includes the four principal activities that CCGs are asked to concentrate on: reducing smoking in pregnancy; monitoring foetal growth; raising awareness of foetal movements; and improving foetal monitoring.

That is all very well—I put great emphasis on the improvement of foetal monitoring, so that the information is provided and is fed back to the individual concerned—but my constituent also wants detailed information about what the CCG is doing to ensure that the issue is addressed. The CCG operates across two obstetric units

and four midwife-led units and has a small number of babies delivered at home each year. She has not been able to get detail about what that CCG will do to address the situation for the future. I hope we can send a strong message to CCGs around the country that concentrating merely on the Government's four key objectives is not good enough. What we need is the detailed information on how they are going to go about dealing with this issue through their sustainability and transformation plans to provide reassurance for women who are in this situation.

I appreciate the effect that stillbirth has on women, but it is not exclusively a woman's problem. The fact that stillbirth occurs is a problem that affects the whole family, and it affects men as well. I know that, to my own cost, through a family incident. It is essential to bear in mind the impact on the mental health of men who are involved in cases of stillbirth and simply do not know where to turn in what is a completely traumatic experience. I urge the Minister to concentrate on providing information about what the Government are doing for the whole family and for the wider community.

My next point is that essentially we are talking about an artificial distinction here. We are talking about the distinction between miscarriage and stillbirth and about a particular period, which comes at around 24 weeks. That is totally unfair. Before the 24 weeks, parents are given no chance to grieve for the baby who has been lost, or to go through the process of putting their lives back together again. We ought to look at that to see whether that distinction is still relevant.

**Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP):** Does the hon. Gentleman agree that counselling should be available for the whole family on request? We should be seeking to take that forward across the whole UK.

**John Howell:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Counselling needs to be provided for the whole family unit to see them through a very traumatic experience.

**Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP):** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for introducing the debate and to the hon. Gentleman for his point about the effect that stillbirth has on the family. To add to that—I know I am not alone; there are women with whom I am sitting here who have suffered miscarriages, too—after you have suffered a miscarriage or a stillbirth, it is extremely difficult to enjoy any subsequent pregnancy. Every minute of every day is spent wondering whether you are going to lose the next child too. It is worth while bringing that point to bear in this debate to ensure that support is available for women after their loss.

**John Howell:** The hon. Lady makes a valid point. It is not just about the individual stillbirth, traumatic though that is; it is about the future and ensuring that individuals can go through another pregnancy in the full knowledge that they are more likely to be safe than not. Anything that we can do to help that, we should. We should take any opportunity to take things forward. That is all I wanted to contribute to the debate, and I am grateful to have had the chance to speak.

1.53 pm

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir David. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing this debate and for her heartfelt, considered and important contribution. It will have made a difference to many families, and I believe it will truly help to drive improvements.

We have heard about Sands. Sands awareness month should be a matter of concern to every Member of this House. Stillbirth can affect any family, and it is vital that we give it proper consideration and have ample time to discuss the varied and complex issues that surround it. I understand that stillbirth is a topic that is so hard to think of, let alone to debate here, but if we do not, we miss the opportunity to confront issues facing children and families who have been affected throughout Scotland and the UK. They deserve our attention and consideration.

I know that many people have their own personal experiences to draw on; I am very fortunate that this is not an experience I have had directly. I cannot say how thankful I am for that, and for the excellent care that I was fortunate to receive during my two pregnancies. But, like many here today, I know that not everyone has had experiences like mine. Far too many people watching today will have experienced the heartbreak of stillbirth. I will never forget a little girl who would have been the very same age as my eldest son, but who was stillborn. That is one of the memories that will stay with me forever. It is important that we remember all these children and acknowledge them.

We are fortunate to have access to excellent House of Commons Library briefings for debates. I was struck by the introduction to a briefing relating to this debate, which said:

“When a baby dies the impact on a family can be profound, with many parents reporting symptoms of anxiety and depression for years after their baby has died.”

I appreciate that that statement was included in that briefing because, although it seems obvious to all of us here today, it needed to be written down and put in black in white to be absolutely clear. There can be few things that anyone will ever have to deal with that are more difficult than the loss of their baby. It will have a terrible impact on family members, and for a long time. It is not something parents or families will ever forget about.

It is also vital that we continue to take steps to look at why stillbirth happens and what we can do to minimise the instances and increase awareness among medical professionals and parents of anything that might cause concern and be worth looking at.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on her very moving speech. Some Members may be aware that before I came to the House I specialised in medical negligence law, mainly acting for pursuers, or plaintiffs as they are known south of the border. Drawing on what our hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran said, does my hon. Friend agree that what is most important in

cases where there has been medical mismanagement is a prompt investigation, a prompt apology and an undertaking to ensure that whatever lessons are required to be learned are learned?

**Kirsten Oswald:** I agree entirely with my hon. and learned Friend.

Stillbirth rates remained largely unchanged from the late 1990s to 2011. More recent figures have shown a decline, and the rate is now at its lowest level since 1992. Of course, that is positive, and there is undoubtedly a desire from both the UK and Scottish Governments to progress towards improving those figures further, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran said, a desire is not enough: real action is needed. Maureen Watt, the then Scottish Public Health Minister, noted that

“The Scottish Government responded to a parliamentary petition in 2010...by forming a stillbirth working group and setting an aim in 2012 to reduce stillbirths by 15 per cent by 2015”.

She also noted a subsequent reduction of 18% in stillbirth rates, which

“shows that a combination of approaches”

can make an impact. Importantly, she stated that

“ministers were determined to reduce rates further.”

As my hon. Friend said at the beginning of her speech, this is not an issue of party politics, as I am confident that everyone present agrees; it is about finding ways to improve prospects for babies and preventing heartbreak and loss for families. We can all agree that this issue should have our support.

I am pleased that Scotland has made progress on reducing the stillbirth rate in recent years and similarly that the UK has made progress, but there is much work to be done and we must commit to focusing on that. It is also important that mothers who go through this traumatic and heartbreaking experience are offered the appropriate support and care, and have access, as my hon. Friends have said, to a complaints process that is open and transparent and offers opportunity for redress.

The comments made about the importance of investigation and the role of coroners are worth considering. It was interesting to see the Royal College of Midwives in *The Lancet* stating:

“Attention to preventing stillbirths in approach to term and 36 weeks plus must be improved”,

and that more must be done, just as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran. We need to focus our minds on the stark statistics that she has told us about. One third of stillbirths happen at term—37 weeks’ gestation or beyond—and in the vast majority of all stillbirths we never know what has befallen the baby. These areas need to be addressed with as much energy and urgency as we address important messages regarding maternal health and wellbeing.

Researchers for the Campaign for Safer Births have estimated that approximately 500 babies die every year because of avoidable factors during birth. Many are left permanently brain-damaged or disabled. They believe that all these tragic deaths and injuries could be avoided with better care. They aim to raise awareness of the issue, which my hon. Friend has surely helped to do by securing this debate today. They want

to see safety improvements in maternity units and the provision of information to those who have experienced poor care or negligence.

I believe that a combination of approaches, such as those adopted by the Scottish Government, can make a material difference, but it is clear that we must be committed to driving change if we want to continue to reduce stillbirth rates. That will not happen without continued targeted action. The stillbirth group established by the Scottish Government has provided evidence that the stillbirth rate has fallen in Scotland since it commenced its work. There are 15 maternity units in Scotland taking part in a UK-wide study looking at foetal movements, which we have heard are a vital indicator, and, in particular, at how units respond to women who report decreased foetal movement. I am hopeful that there will be further progress in Scotland and the UK in this very important area.

In March 2015, the Scottish Government appointed Catherine Calderwood, an obstetrician and gynaecologist who was the national clinical director for maternity and women's health for NHS England, as chief medical officer. That is important. Her work on reducing stillbirths and neonatal deaths in Scotland and avoidable harm in maternity services will be influential as we continue to push for vital further reductions in the number of stillborn babies. Those stillborn children are our children—they are our families', our friends' and our neighbours' children—and we can best respect that by supporting continuing research, encouraging open conversations about stillbirth and helping to break down the taboos that are still all too prevalent. As politicians, we must push for new research and new ways of working, and encourage real dialogue among medical professionals about stillbirth, particularly where things have gone wrong with the care provided.

I express again my admiration for my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran for securing this most important debate, and to the other speakers who have contributed.

2.1 pm

**Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): I echo the comments about the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and congratulate her on securing this very important debate. She is incredibly brave to talk about her experience—I know that from my personal experience of doing the same thing. I also pay tribute to her colleagues who have come to support her, because that is hugely comforting. What she has done is incredibly brave, and I thank her very much for that.

The hon. Lady spoke about the importance of talking about stillbirth and neonatal death. She hit the nail on the head: we do not like talking about death in this country—even more, we do not like talking about the death of children and, in particular, babies—but it is only by talking about not just stillbirth but neonatal death and the death of babies that we can understand the scale of the issue. As she rightly said, a lot of people in this country do not understand how poor we are at tackling this issue. We are somewhere in the region of 23rd in the western world. Given that we have one of the best health services in the world, that is totally unacceptable.

I do not particularly like talking about statistics when it comes to babies. The hon. Lady rightly said that somewhere in the region of 3,500 babies a year are stillborn. If half of those deaths are avoidable, that is approximately 1,500 to 2,000 babies and 2,000 to 4,000 parents who would not have had to go through this experience. It is not just the parents who feel the effects of stillbirth and neonatal death, but the grandparents, the friends and the wider family.

I will talk about my own experience very briefly. I have three beautiful children, but only two of them are currently with us. We lost our son. He was diagnosed at 22 weeks with a very rare chromosomal disorder called Edwards syndrome, which meant that there was a relatively high likelihood that he would not make it. As was said earlier, it meant living every day with the prospect of a stillbirth—it was too late for a miscarriage at that stage. He went full term—he was a fighter—so we went through the experience of stillbirth at full term. I have said in the Chamber previously that there is no word to describe the experience other than numbness—in fact, I will not describe it because it is going to make me upset. The point I want to make is that every single stillbirth is an absolute personal tragedy. We as a Government and as politicians have a duty to do all we can to ensure that as few people as possible go through that personal experience.

That happened in 2014. On entering this place, I was committed to doing something about this issue. I teamed up with a number of other MPs and we set up an all-party parliamentary group on baby loss, which the hon. Lady kindly joined, to do something about this on a cross-party basis. The Government have the responsibility and the power to do a lot of the work, but the all-party group can act as a conduit between the fantastic charities that work in the sector and the Government, who I know are committed to tackling the issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) made an important point about mums and dads. We thought it very important that I co-chair the APPG; it is intentional that we have a man and a woman co-chairing the group. It is important that we address the issue from both sides, because it affects men as much as it affects women.

As the hon. Lady said, Baby Loss Awareness Week is coming up in October. In Parliament, we will be marking that occasion for the very first time. Mr Speaker has kindly allowed us the use of his state rooms for a function. We will be sending around ribbons and encouraging as many right hon. and hon. Members as possible to wear them proudly, and to talk about and raise the issue as much as possible in that week and also throughout the year.

I spoke earlier about the amazing work of charities in this sector. I will name just two—Sands and Bliss—but there are so many more that do incredible work, from charities carrying out research to very small organisations that knit hats, mittens, scarves and all sorts of other things, which can be hugely comforting to parents who have gone through this experience.

The Government have a very important role to play in tackling this issue. As the hon. Lady said, research is a huge part of that, whether it is on social inequality—which, as she rightly said, is a known factor in stillbirth—maternal age or ethnicity. We still do not really understand why ethnicity is so important. There is another awkward subject that we do not like to talk about in this country:

[Will Quince]

we do not encourage parents who have gone through this terrible experience to have post-mortems. Often, medical professionals do not want to ask the question, but if they phrase it correctly and say, “By offering your baby for a post-mortem, it would help us immensely in understanding, in research terms, why this happens,” it will help to prevent more in the future. We have to do far more to encourage post-mortems.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley talked about education for parents-to-be, whether about drugs, smoking, diet or obesity—the two are somewhat different. There is a huge amount of work to do in that area.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right to suggest that this is not a party political issue—it crosses the divide—but I am hugely proud that the Government recognise that it is serious and have taken steps to address it. They are not just talking but putting money in, and they have set a target. Targets are thrown around all the time, but they are meaningless unless the money and resources are behind them, so I am proud that the Government have done that.

There are some important elements to the Government’s new care bundle. I fully agree with my hon. Friend that it is important that we ensure that clinical commissioning groups and hospital trusts are doing what the Government are mandating them to do. The smoking cessation work is really important. Still now, more than one in 10 mums smoke during pregnancy. We know that that is such a high-risk factor when it comes to stillbirth. On foetal growth monitoring, we are one of the few countries that do not scan in the late stages of pregnancy. We scan at about 20 weeks and then do not do anything until the mother goes into hospital, but lots of other countries scan at 36 weeks. We are also looking at foetal growth, which is really important. The bump is measured from naval to the pelvic bone, and if there are any issues with its size, the mother is sent to hospital for a scan with a consultant. That is very important. We need to do far more foetal growth scanning in the later stages of pregnancy.

The hon. Lady also made a hugely important point about the awareness of foetal movement and the importance of foetal monitoring. We absolutely have to empower more women when they get that feeling. In so many cases of stillbirth, the mums say with hindsight, “I knew there was something wrong, but I didn’t want to bother health professionals,” or, “I phoned my doctor or the NHS helpline, and they said don’t worry.” The reality is that, if there is an issue, mums often know. It is important to empower women, so that if they feel something is not right, they go and get it checked out. We would much rather they got a diagnosis to say, “There’s nothing wrong. You’re okay. Go home”, than they ignored it, but worried about it, only for horrendous consequences to ensue.

The new Government care bundle is important and good, with £4 million being put in. In my local hospital, Colchester general hospital, we have already seen the start of that money trickling down. New monitors have been installed, and they are going in all across the country, which will help with the monitoring element in the later stages of pregnancy. Another hugely important bit is the training of midwives and nurses, and more than £1 million has been put into that. Finally, a £500,000 investment has been made in the review process, to ensure that we document and learn from every single

stillbirth, while treating each as a personal tragedy. Those records should be kept and shared, so that we can look at best practice across hospitals. Some of our hospitals in the United Kingdom are fantastic and world-class, but, sadly, some are not. We need to bring all hospitals and maternity units in the country up to the very best standard.

I am pushing the time limit, but I will touch briefly on two more points. Sadly, even if we meet the Government’s target on stillbirth, which is to reduce it by 15% by 2020 and half by 2030—an incredible aim, and I would love it if we got to that position—1,500 to 2,000 babies would be stillborn every single year, so it is still important to deal with some of the bereavement issues in hospitals across our country.

The first priority should be bereavement suites; it is imperative to get one attached to every maternity unit in the country, because it is totally unacceptable that any mum or dad, having gone through the experience of a stillbirth, should have to go on to a general maternity ward, surrounded by happy families with balloons and teddies and the sound of crying babies. That is not acceptable. The Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer), has absolutely recognised the issue, and is working hard on it; he is doing a study of exactly what provision we have in our hospitals. I would love it if, by the end of this Parliament, we could have a bereavement suite attached to every maternity unit in the country.

Finally, although the bereavement suite is one part of that jigsaw, the second part is having enough bereavement-trained midwives and gynaecological counsellors in those units who are able to give the support to parents, not only at the time, but afterwards and—as the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran said—with future pregnancies.

In conclusion, the hon. Lady is hugely brave. She raises a hugely important issue, and one that I know the Government recognise and are taking action to address. We, as cross-party politicians, can keep pressure on the Government to ensure that they meet that target of a 15% reduction by the end of the Parliament and—what an aim!—to halve stillbirth by 2030.

2.13 pm

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): Thank you, Sir David, for the opportunity to speak in this debate, the subject of which is of such huge importance. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for bringing this issue, and her own tragic experience, to the attention of the House, an act of true bravery. I cannot imagine how hugely difficult it is for her and others who have contributed to the debate to speak so openly about losing their children. Equally, I cannot imagine how difficult it is for any parent or family to lose a child, but today is about raising awareness of stillbirth, and I will highlight to the House the case of dear friends of mine who had twin girls last year, but, tragically, lost one of them, Sophia Faith Fraser, who was born sleeping as a result of a little-known complication called twin-to-twin transfusion syndrome.

My friends were delighted and instantly felt hugely privileged and special to discover that they were to have twins. However, at their 20-week scan they were referred

to the foetal medicine unit at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital in Glasgow, as their identical twin girls looked to be suffering from severe complications. The doctor confirmed their fears; their girls were suffering from stage 2 twin-to-twin transfusion syndrome. TTTS is a rare disorder, which can happen in identical-twin pregnancies and, simply put, is an unequal flow of blood between the twins across the shared placenta. One baby donates blood across the placenta to their twin, becoming dangerously anaemic, and the recipient twin becomes so overloaded with blood that they are at risk of heart failure. It is a critical condition, which can be fatal to both babies.

My friends' doctor explained that laser surgery would be the best option, to try and correct the blood flow by closing some of the vessels the girls were sharing, but the procedure carries major risks, and the parents were advised that they could lose one or both of their girls. If left untreated, however, there was only a 10% chance that both girls would survive, and they would be very likely to suffer brain damage. As we can imagine, the parents wanted to help their girls in any way they could, so they decided to go ahead with the laser surgery.

The case carried a high risk of complications so, two days later, Sophia's mum was taken to Birmingham, where their doctor could perform the surgery with the support of a specialist team. The laser surgery went well, closing some of the shared vessels through a small incision in Sophia's mum's abdomen. Two litres of fluid were drained from her womb, a dangerous side effect of the TTTS, and her parents were told that a scan would be performed an hour later, to tell if there were still two heartbeats. That was the longest hour of their lives, but they were overjoyed when the scan showed that both girls had survived the procedure, and had already begun to make improvements. However, the parents were warned that the next few days were critical and, a week later, during a check-up, it became apparent that although the laser surgery had corrected some of the flow, it had not solved the problem completely.

Sophia, the donor twin, was in grave danger and required a blood transfusion, which was given directly into her stomach through her mother's stomach with a fine needle. That procedure carried great risk not only for Sophia but for her sister, Eloise. Without it, however, Sophia could not survive, and the parents wanted to do everything possible. Their aim was for the girls to make it to 28 weeks' gestation, when they could be delivered and given a higher chance of survival. The blood transfusion brought some success, and the procedure was repeated to try and build up Sophia's blood supply. However, heartbreakingly, when her mother was 25 weeks pregnant, Sophia passed away. The parents were devastated; she had fought so hard and for so long. They felt they were living in a nightmare, and—as they described it to me—one they could still not wake up from.

My friends were grieving for Sophia while fighting hard for Eloise, who was still in danger and had to be scanned every two to three days. Sophia and Eloise's mum bravely carried both girls until she was 34 weeks pregnant when, after a check-up, she was given an emergency caesarean section due to a bleed in her womb. Eloise Hope Fraser was born at 6.46 pm, weighing 4 lbs 7.5 oz, and her little sister, Sophia Faith Fraser, was born sleeping shortly afterwards.

Both girls had been very poorly during the pregnancy, with the uneven blood flow endangering their lives and putting them at risk of severe long-term health problems or brain damage. The girls' parents believe that Sophia knew how ill she was and let go, giving her big sister a special gift, the gift of life. For that, they think she is a brave and amazing little girl, who will always be an important part of their family. I know they could not put into words how much they love her and her sister, Eloise. Eloise is now thriving, and making her little sister proud every day.

My friends' case is rare, but not unique. They have often said to me that the care they received during their pregnancy from the foetal medicine unit was absolutely outstanding. They described Dr Janice Gibson as the most dedicated and skilled medical professional they had ever met. She held their hands and cried with them, and she gave them hope and sound advice. They can never repay her for what she did for their family. Dr Gibson is the only person in Scotland trained to carry out the laser procedure, and funding is needed to support ongoing training and families going through similar experiences. The couple now hope to raise money for this important cause, which they have been doing through the Sophia Fraser Foundation. The money they raise will support foetal medicine through the Yorkhill Children's Charity.

I tell Sophia's story today, with her parents' permission, to highlight some of the unknown complications and rare disorders that can occur during childbirth, such as the twin transfusion syndrome. Aftercare and bereavement support for parents, as has been said, is so important, and I pay tribute to Sands, which does work in my West Lothian constituency and across our countries to support families who have lost children to stillbirth or neonatal complications. We have come a long way in medical developments, and although Sophia's mum had the best care she felt she could have had, we must continue to raise awareness and work to improve services and care so that lives can be saved, and so that parents do not have to go through what Patricia or Sophia's parents have gone through.

2.19 pm

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is very hard to sum up this debate. We have heard some extraordinary contributions from my very brave colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), and from the hon. Members for Henley (John Howell) and for Colchester (Will Quince) and my hon. Friends the Members for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) and for Livingston (Hannah Bardell). While listening to all those wonderful contributions, I reflected on my own story, which is not of a stillbirth but of a bad miscarriage, which I have never mentioned to my children who are alive now. This debate is so important, because it puts into the public domain the pain, grief and horror of stillbirth. As parliamentarians, we must make this a subject that we are able to discuss so that we can improve the life chances of children yet to be born.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran asked the Minister to take steps to improve the statistics. The hon. Member for Colchester said that we do not want to talk about statistics; we are talking about babies. We want to improve the life chances of

[*Marion Fellows*]

babies yet to be born. This is a time that I feel proud to be a Member of Parliament, because we can do that. The Sands month for remembering and mentioning stillbirths is important, as is the work of the other charities that have been mentioned. One charity that has not yet been mentioned is Kicks Count, whose work leads directly to women listening to their bodies and ensures that if there is not foetal movement, they can report that. I hope that as a result of this debate, women will be listened to. I know, since I have been there, that women know their bodies. They know when something is not right. If only we could get health professionals to take on board what women are telling them, that could make a huge difference.

Other changes could be made. As my hon. Friend said, health trusts—CCGs in England—should not be investigating themselves. There should be independent investigations into deaths, and those investigations should be time-limited and not allowed to drag on. That is important. Coroners should be able to hold inquests and post-mortems should be carried out to help our understanding of why babies die just before, during and just after birth. It is important that we take that work forward. I understand that men are also affected by stillbirth. We sometimes concentrate on mothers, but we must recognise that it is families who suffer.

As has already been said, there is nothing but consensus among the parties in this debate, both north and south of the border, and that is very important. We all want the best for babies. We all want them to be born. We all want to improve our standing in global statistics. Actually, we all just want more babies to be born safely, and when they cannot be, for their deaths to be investigated so that the fight to help this really difficult situation moves forward.

2.23 pm

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this extremely important debate and the compelling way that she introduced it. She is right that she is not alone in having gone through such a terrible experience, and she is certainly not alone in wanting to move this issue up the political agenda. I pay tribute to her for the courage that she has shown in retelling her experience. I do not think that any Member could fail to have been moved by her speech, and I am sure that many of those watching her contribution will, sadly, have recognised the personal tragedy, which was made more difficult by the defensive attitude of the health service. Many people have had such experiences—not just in this area but through many other failings in care in the health service. She made a compelling case for the extension of coroners' powers to holding inquests on stillbirths. As we know from recent high-profile inquests, there is a need for a comprehensive review of that whole system.

Hon. Members from both sides have made excellent and sometimes very moving contributions. I draw particular attention to the contribution of the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), who rightly raised the impact on parents' mental health of such experiences and the loss

that the whole family feels. Not only the mother and father, but little brothers or sisters and the wider family are impacted by such tragic events.

The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) was right to highlight the need for prevention and how many parents experience a stillbirth and never get an adequate explanation of how that happened. I agree that only through continued targeted action will we drive the necessary progress. The hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) summed up the challenge very well when he said that we do not like talking about death in this country. I pay tribute to him for the great strength that he showed in talking about his experience. I am sure that he will be able to get many more Members to talk about this subject through his work on the APPG. The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) spoke with great sincerity about her constituents' experience and the twin to twin transfusion syndrome process, and conveyed the incredible range of emotions that parents must go through in such situations, which are rare but none the less extremely difficult for those involved.

I welcome the debate, which, as we have heard, coincides with Sands awareness month. I add my voice to those of others who have already paid tribute to the enormously important work that that charity does. Sands awareness month gives us the opportunity to increase awareness of stillbirth and neonatal death and the devastating impact experienced when a baby dies before, during or after birth, which hon. Members have conveyed with great sincerity and courage.

In November, I was privileged to have the opportunity to respond for the Opposition in a debate marking World Prematurity Day. That debate was also difficult, and what we heard then from Members about stillbirths and neonatal deaths was equally compelling and challenging. We still face those challenges, and this is an opportunity to explore in further detail some of the issues that were raised in November and have been raised today and to scrutinise the progress that the Government have made in the six months since that debate.

As has been said already, although there has been enormous progress in the past century in tackling stillbirth and infant mortality rates, progress has more or less stalled in the past two decades, and the UK continues to perform significantly worse than many comparable nations on infant mortality rates and remains one of the poorest performing countries in the developed world for stillbirths. That is a clear sign that we are not doing well enough in providing neonatal care or tackling the underlying public health issues that contribute to premature births and stillbirth.

Research into babies stillborn from 28 weeks indicates that the UK has a stillbirth rate of 2.9 per 1,000 births—higher than Germany at 2.4; Poland at 2.3; the Netherlands at 1.8; and Denmark at 1.7. Members have said that this issue is not just about statistics, and it is about far more than that, but those statistics need to be laid out, because it is clear that we are not doing as well as we should be and progress is not as swift as in some other places in Europe. I think that all Members want to see that situation addressed. We welcome the Secretary of State's ambition to reduce stillbirths and neonatal deaths by 50% by 2030, but 14 years is a long way off, so will the Minister give us some indication of what progress he expects to be made before that date? Will he also set



out where he expects us to be by around 2020, by which time the Secretary of State has indicated that he expects there to have been a measurable reduction?

We welcome the announcement from 13 November of a £4 million investment in equipment and training and the establishment of a new system enabling staff to review and learn from every stillbirth and neonatal death. The Government have signalled their intention to review every one of those tragedies, and I would appreciate it if the Minister could update us on how close we are to reaching that target, and when he expects it to be met.

One of the key themes that has emerged today and in the debate we had last year is that we have some of the finest neonatal care in the world in this country, but that there is simply far too much variability between hospitals and regions. In my role as an Opposition spokesperson I have had the pleasure of visiting some excellent facilities, most recently those at Barnsley general hospital, where the commitment and attention to detail of the staff, based on listening to and valuing patients' views, was particularly impressive. At this point, I think it is worth paying tribute to NHS staff who are tasked with helping families at their most difficult time for the sensitivity, understanding and professionalism that they show.

The hon. Member for Colchester raised the issue of bereavement suites being available in every maternity unit in this country. If we had the same quality of care that I saw in Barnsley throughout the country, that would be a real achievement. We need to see those units that currently offer the very best care spreading their expertise across the country, so that everyone can have the very best throughout their pregnancy. Attempts to achieve that have begun. In March, NHS England published new guidance, building on existing clinical guidance and best practice. It identified four key interventions, with the aim of meeting the Secretary of State's ambition to halve the rate of stillbirths by 2020. Those key interventions are reducing smoking in pregnancy, enhancing detection of foetal growth restriction, improving awareness of foetal movement and improving foetal monitoring during labour.

It has been estimated that if no women smoked during pregnancy, 7.1% of stillbirths could be avoided, which would equate to around 230 additional babies surviving each year. Smoking and passive smoking increase the risk of infant mortality by an estimated 40%. However, despite those startling statistics, we have seen a significant cut in public health funding, leading to around 40% of local authorities cutting budgets for smoking cessation services. Only last week I saw two pregnant women smoking on the same day. While I appreciate that that is anecdotal, it nevertheless brought home to me that we are certainly not making the inroads that we should be into cutting smoking during pregnancy. As the hon. Member for Colchester said, one in 10 women still smoke during pregnancy, which is startling, given the huge amount of evidence about the risks of doing so. We clearly need to do more to get that message across. If the key interventions are to be effective, cuts to public health budgets will not help in achieving that aim.

I have no doubt that the other suggested interventions will also help us to drive down rates of infant mortality. However, as the Royal College of Nursing has pointed out, England remains 2,600 full-time midwives short of the number it needs. We simply must have the correct

level of staffing if we are to successfully implement that guidance. There are also serious issues in the levels of other clinical staff in neonatal units. The report published last year by Bliss, "Hanging in the balance", argues that neonatal services are "stretched to breaking point". It also states that two thirds of neonatal intensive care units do not have enough doctors and nurses, with around 2,000 more nurses needed to fill that gap. A report by the Royal College of Midwives also stated that more than 40% of wards became so busy last year that they were forced to close their doors. The average unit closed its doors on five occasions, with some closing more than 20 times.

Worrying reports this week also suggest that staff shortages and increasing demands are impacting on the ability of midwives and maternity staff to provide care. A survey by the Royal College of Midwives found that 62% of midwives and maternity support workers felt dehydrated at work because they did not have time to have a drink; 79% did not take the breaks to which they were entitled; and 52% had witnessed an error, near miss or other incident in the past month. Given the impact of current staff shortages, I question the proposal to replace bursaries for nurses and midwives with student loans, as I believe that is a risk we cannot afford to take at this stage.

The Universities Minister has confirmed that, since the tripling of tuition fees in 2012, the number of student nurses over the age of 25 has plummeted. Given that the average age of nurses and midwives in training is over 25, I have serious concerns that, for all the good intentions we have at the moment, we will not have the resources and staff to deliver the improved outcomes we all want to see. Areas such as neonatal care, which are already stretched, need more support, and I therefore invite the Minister to reconsider the current policy.

I conclude by focusing on the families who experience bereavement when their baby dies during or after birth. It is difficult to contemplate what they go through when what should be a time of joy and celebration becomes a period of tragedy beyond measure. Again, I pay tribute to the compelling way hon. Members have expressed their experiences. They have certainly given us all an awful lot to consider. What has made many people's experiences even more difficult is that speaking about the loss of a baby has, as many Members have said, traditionally been considered taboo. Families have often felt they have nowhere to turn for help, or even to talk about it. The fact that Members have had the courage to talk about it today will help us challenge that taboo, and along with Sands awareness month, we will be able to make progress in making sure that we can talk about these issues openly and give a voice to those who have experienced the personal tragedy of the death of a baby.

I hope the great sincerity and passion with which Members have spoken will lead to a redoubling of efforts, not only in terms of neonatal care and tackling public health issues but in ensuring that we listen to the experiences of people who have gone through this, so that families get the support they need at the point of such a personal tragedy. They deserve the best possible bereavement support from highly trained professionals, and we should do everything in our power to ensure they are offered nothing less than the very best.

2.36 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman):** I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this debate and on sharing her experiences so personally and powerfully with the House. I thank colleagues from all sides of the House for doing likewise. Sometimes this House, when it speaks with a personal voice on non-partisan issues, can strike a blow for democracy. I think anyone listening today will have seen their representatives doing their jobs and sharing here in Parliament that which is so often not well expressed in the land.

It is a great pleasure for me to stand in for the Minister for Care Quality, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer). He is unable to be here today, ironically because his wife, who is pregnant, is having a check-up. I hope it will not be anything serious, and I am sure we all wish him well. I know how much he wanted to be here today, and a number of Members on all sides have paid tribute to his leadership and commitment to this issue, which is very personal. I know he would like to be nowhere more than here, other than beside his wife.

Being here is a particular pleasure for me, partly because I am the Minister responsible for research in the NHS, genetics and unleashing the power of our health system to use its daily footprint of treatment and diagnoses to help to prevent suffering for future generations. This is an area in which, as hon. Members have touched on, good research and intelligent use of data from our health system can help to support future care and improve standards of care and prevention.

On a personal note, I was a child of parents who lost a child. I was due to have a baby sister. She was stillborn very late, and it was a tragedy for the whole family, as hon. Members have talked about, and devastating for my mother. It created huge pressure on my mother and her then husband's marriage, which did not survive, and led to a complex raft of mental health and domestic family issues, which, as a number of colleagues have said, is all too common. People suffer in silence, and I think all of us talking about this today will in itself help to give people courage to recognise that this is an important issue that people should feel free and able to talk about.

Before I address the specific points made by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran and other colleagues, I want to set the scene on the Government's approach to stillbirths in England. I and the Minister for Care Quality, and the Department of Health and its officials, very much welcome the hon. Lady raising these issues today and her support for Sands awareness month, which is this month.

As a number of colleagues have mentioned, stillbirth is often a taboo subject that many people find difficult to talk about and, because of that, many people do not know the statistics. Stillbirth is a personal tragedy, but the statistics matter. Around 15 babies every day are stillborn or die in the first weeks after birth. Today, perhaps 15 families who are expecting a joyous life event will instead experience one of the biggest tragedies of their lives, with another 15 tomorrow and another 15 the day after, and so on. If there were 15 fatal car crashes every day, I dare say the country would be in

uproar, but stillbirths remain an uncomfortable subject for people to discuss. It is important that here in Parliament we raise the issue and raise awareness of it.

I want to commend the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss, which is co-chaired by my hon. Friends the Members for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for Colchester (Will Quince). The APPG was established following one of the most moving Adjournment debates held in Parliament, last November, on bereavement support for families who have experienced the loss of a baby. Reducing the number of stillbirths is an absolute priority for the Department of Health, and we will continue to work closely with Sands and the health system to raise awareness of the risk factors and the clinical practices that can improve outcomes for families.

In fact, England is a very safe country in which to have a baby and it is encouraging that the stillbirth rate in England has fallen from 5.2 deaths per 1,000 births in 2011, to 4.7 in 2013; but we all know that there is much more work to be done. Compared with other similar countries, our stillbirth rates are frankly unacceptable. *The Lancet* stillbirth series was published in January and showed that the UK was ranked 24th out of 49 high-income countries. The same publication showed that the UK's rate of progress in reducing stillbirths has been slower than that of most other high-income countries. The annual rate of stillbirth reduction in the UK was 1.4%, compared with 6.8% in the Netherlands. To be frank, that places us in the bottom third of the table—in 114th place out of 164 countries around the world—for progress on stillbirths.

We are aware, however, of the impressive work being done through the Scottish Maternity and Children Quality Improvement Collaborative that has resulted in a 15% decrease in the stillbirth rate in Scotland in just three years. That is another area where the devolution of responsibility allows healthy competition between the devolved Administrations and the best can inspire the rest. We want NHS maternity services to be an exemplar of the results that we can achieve when we focus on improving safety and the patient experience. We believe that, with a concerted effort, we can make England one of the safest places in the world to have a baby.

The Government are wholeheartedly committed to improving outcomes for mothers and babies. In November last year, the Secretary of State launched the national ambition to reduce the rate of stillbirths, neonatal deaths, maternal deaths and brain injuries that occur during or soon after birth by 50% by 2030, with the short-term aim of achieving a 20% reduction during this Parliament by 2020. We were delighted that the royal colleges and maternity and neonatal professionals, as well as key third sector organisations, including Sands, have come together in this area and have welcomed that important yet stretching ambition; we know that to achieve it the health system, the Government, charities and the public all have to take action and work collaboratively.

We know from experience in some maternity services in England that making safety a priority can have an impact very quickly. Strong leadership in the service, good communication, implementation of evidence-based practices, learning from other services about what works and what does not, multidisciplinary team working and training can all have a real impact quickly.

To support the NHS in achieving that stretching ambition, the Government have also announced additional investment: £2.24 million to support trusts in buying monitoring and training equipment to improve safety. That fund was run at the beginning of this year and has now been completed. Over 90 trusts have been successful and received a share of funding, allowing them to buy the latest equipment. We are also putting £1 million into rolling out training programmes to ensure that staff have the skills and confidence they need to deliver world-leading standards of care.

We have also committed to fund the development of a new system—the standardised perinatal mortality review tool. Once that is complete it will be used consistently across the NHS to enable staff to review and learn from every stillbirth and neonatal death. We are developing the tool as many national reports have referenced—as colleagues have here this afternoon—the fact that the same mistakes are being made repeatedly, which is unacceptable. What is missing in these cases is a systematic approach to improving services. We must view individual failings as important and recognise the need for accountability, while balancing that with the need to establish standard processes that will prevent mistakes and avoidable incidents from reoccurring.

In November we also committed to work with Sign up to Safety—the national patient safety campaign launched by the Government in 2014—to support all organisations and to ensure that they can contribute to the national ambition and share best practice. In March we launched the Sign up to Safety sub-brand, “Spotlight on Maternity”. The new guidance asked all organisations with maternity services to commit publicly to placing a spotlight on maternity, to contribute towards achieving the Government’s national ambition and to improve maternity outcomes. It set out five high-level themes for services to focus on that are known to make care safer: building stronger leadership; building capacity and skills for all staff; sharing progress and lessons learned across the system; crucially, improving data capture and knowledge; and focusing on perinatal mental illness.

I want to deal, in particular, with a number of points that have been raised, starting with the investigation of stillbirths and neonatal deaths. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran raised two points about the investigation of stillbirths. The first was the suggestion that coroners’ powers should be looked at and could be expanded, so that they have jurisdiction to investigate the death of a child who is stillborn after 37 weeks’ gestation to try to understand why the death occurred and to inform best practice. The second point was about independent investigations about clinical care when concerns are raised about a stillbirth or neonatal death.

By law, coroners can only investigate the death of a child when the child has lived independently of their mother, and there are no current plans for the Ministry of Justice to change that. The points about the importance of parents being able to volunteer to have a coroner look at such cases have been well made this afternoon, and I am sure that Ministers at the Ministry of Justice will be watching this debate. If there is doubt as to whether a death was a stillbirth, it should be reported to the coroner to consider whether an investigation should be carried out. Expanding the remit of coroners would

require a change in the law and would be an issue for the Ministry of Justice—I will make sure that this debate is brought to its attention.

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists’ guidelines on late intrauterine foetal death and stillbirth state that the right approach is for stillbirths to be reviewed in a multi-professional meeting, using a standardised approach to analysis for substandard care and future prevention. We believe that we should be pursuing that focus, led by clinicians. We are looking at all options to improve reviews into stillbirths and neonatal deaths, including investing half a million pounds to create a system to look at them more consistently across the country, so that staff can understand and learn from each incident.

In April we established a new independent healthcare safety investigation branch—HSIB—to carry out investigations and share its findings. It will operate independently of Government and the healthcare system, be transparent and support continuous improvement by using the very best investigative techniques from around the world, as well as fostering learning from staff, patients and stakeholders. We want that branch to act—in the same way as in the airline industry—as an exemplar to the system as a whole, so that investigations improve and clinicians are increasingly confident that when they speak up after a mistake the result will be learning and not blame.

I want to tackle the point the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran made about collaborative care between clinicians—midwives and doctors—and mothers. She called for maternity care that is more collaborative and responsive to women. She is right. She mentioned the statistic from Sands that 45% of women who raised a concern with a health professional during pregnancy were not listened to and then went on to have a stillbirth. That is completely unacceptable. All women should receive safe, personalised maternity care that is responsive to their individual needs and choices. That is why the Minister for Care Quality has taken such a strong lead on this issue.

In February the report of the independent National Maternity Review chaired by Baroness Cumberlege, “Better Births”, was published. It set out the vision for maternity services across England to become safer, more personalised, kinder, professional and more family-friendly. As we work towards achieving the national ambition, the Department will continue to work closely with NHS England to ensure that this work is embedded in the maternity transformation programme that is delivering the “Better Births” programme.

Women and their partners and families also have a role to play. Evidence shows that this stretching ambition cannot be achieved just through improvements to NHS maternity services. The public health contribution will be crucial. In fact, *The Lancet* stillbirth series concluded that 90% of stillbirths in high-income countries occur antenatally and not during labour.

When starting pregnancy, not all women will have the same risk of something going wrong and women’s health before and during pregnancy is one of the factors that most influence rates of stillbirth, neonatal death and maternal death. We know that a body mass index of over 40 doubles the risk of stillbirth. A quarter of stillbirths are associated with smoking, and alcohol consumption is associated with an estimated 40%.

[George Freeman]

In addition, the report, “Mothers and Babies: Reducing Risk through Audits and Confidential Enquiries in the UK” published in June 2015 showed that the risk for women living in poverty is 57% higher, for babies from black and minority ethnic groups it is 50% higher and for teenage mothers and mothers over 40 it is 39% higher. Those striking statistics show why the Department of Health will continue to work closely with Public Health England and voluntary sector organisations to help women to have a healthy pregnancy and families to have the best start in life wherever they are and whoever they are.

As part of the national ambition, the Department is already developing a public-facing communications campaign with Sands and Best Beginnings to highlight the avoidable risk factors. It is vital that women and their families understand these risks and the impact they can have on outcomes for them and their babies, and the lifestyle changes they can make to increase their likelihood of a positive outcome. This campaign will be launched imminently and I encourage all hon. Members to support it during the launch period.

I want to touch on research as the Minister for research in the Department. Some hon. Members have asked that we support research into the causes of stillbirth and neonatal death so we can better understand how to identify babies at risk. Unless we invest in research, we simply cannot understand how to improve services. I welcome the fact that just this week Sands announced the launch of its 2016 research fund. In recent years, the Government have invested significant sums in support of research into important questions regarding stillbirths and neonatal deaths.

The National Institute for Health Research, for which I am responsible and on which we spend over £1 billion a year as the NHS research laboratory around the country, supports biomedical research centres at Cambridge and Imperial College, where it has invested over £6 million in research on women’s health, including research to increase understanding of stillbirths and neonatal deaths. Other NIHR funding pots are available for bids from researchers and charities. It is vital that we continue to encourage bids for studies on the causes of stillbirth and neonatal deaths and the identification of babies at risk, so we can learn how to improve services.

I want to touch on the importance of bereavement care, which has been raised. The death of a baby, whether during pregnancy or following birth, is a trauma and a tragedy for those involved. I can only begin to appreciate just how devastating it must be for the parents who experience that loss. It is important that we provide them with appropriate care and support at that time. It is our duty to them. The recent MBRRACE report stated that 60% of parents currently receive a high standard of bereavement care, but that means that 40% do not.

Since 2010, we have already invested £35 million in the NHS to improve birthing environments, including better bereavement rooms and quiet area spaces at nearly 40 hospitals. We have also conducted a survey to map the bereavement provision in England, which will allow us to build up a picture of current provision and identify where the gaps are. The qualitative data we have collected is also crucial in both highlighting areas

of good practice and understanding the challenges that services face. My officials are considering all that information and working on setting out the next steps imminently.

In the time available, I want to try to deal with the other points that have been raised, including third trimester scans. The UK National Screening Committee is currently carrying out a call for new screening proposals. I can send hon. Members details of how to submit a proposal to that funding pot.

On routine antenatal care, the “Better Births” report by the National Maternity Review calls for safer care based on a relationship of mutual trust and respect in line with the woman’s decisions. The vision is for women from the antenatal period to receive care from a small team of midwives who work closely with an identified obstetrician. The relationship developed between the woman and the clinicians needs to ensure that the woman receives personalised and safe care that is responsive to their individual needs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) asked about ensuring that clinical commissioning groups are properly aware of their obligations. The “Saving Babies’ Lives” care bundle published in late March by NHS England brings together elements of maternity care that are recognised as evidence-based and/or essential for best practice. It is designed to tackle stillbirth and early neonatal death, and focuses on those four key areas. I am happy to take this opportunity to highlight the fact that CCGs should be aware of it and to make sure that NHS England ensures that CCGs are aware of their responsibilities and what is expected of them.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) asked about our commitment to report on the progress of our ambition of a 20% reduction by 2020. I am delighted to confirm that the standardised perinatal mortality review tool will be available to all trusts by 2017 and we will provide annual progress reports following the launch of the strategy. The annual progress report will include expert advice from all the royal colleges and we plan to publish the first this autumn.

Some hon. Members asked about counselling for families. We are committed and believe that good bereavement care should consider the needs of the whole family: mother, father and children. The Government are absolutely committed to improving bereavement care. We are working actively on setting out the next steps in due course.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran for securing the debate and hon. Members from all sides for sharing often personal and traumatic stories. It has allowed us to highlight some very difficult issues and to acknowledge the silent suffering of so many of our constituents—this condition does not respect party or geographical boundaries—and to stress the importance of tangible progress from all the agencies involved. I hope that I have reassured hon. Members that the Government are taking the matter seriously. We are putting in both investment and, importantly, leadership, which I think all hon. Members agree the Minister for Care Quality is showing. I look forward to seeing the progress of all this work and reporting on it later this year.

2.57 pm

**Patricia Gibson:** I reiterate my gratitude to the House for allowing me to have this debate. I want to make a brief point to the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), which other hon. Members have made: of course this is an issue not just for women; it is an issue for mums, dads, fathers-in-law, mothers-in-law, sisters and brothers. It affects entire families and we must recognise the impact of that.

I thank all those who turned up today to participate in the debate or simply to observe it. Their presence helps to reinforce the importance of the issue. I thank the Minister for responding to the debate. I was hopeful when he mentioned that the Ministry of Justice might be interested in extending coroners' powers. I will watch that carefully. I am heartened to see that there may be some movement towards independent reviews of care and deaths. I am also heartened to hear about the commitment to fund research to better understand the issue. I am very pleased to hear the Minister's emphasis on and understanding of the need for more collaborative care that is more responsive to women, as well as his commitment to and faith in the "Better Births" programme. I thank him for that and I thank everyone who attended.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered stillbirth.

2.58 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Refugee Family Reunion Rules

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

3 pm

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered refugee family reunion rules.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone, for what I think is the first time. I am delighted to have secured this debate on what to my mind is one of the most important issues facing this country today.

I am going to break one of my own golden rules, Mr Bone. I know that from time to time you speak about Mrs Bone in the Chamber, and those little family insights are no doubt treasured by us all. I rarely speak about my family, and probably most right hon. and hon. Members will understand why. Today, however, I will depart from that rule for a minute or two because—this goes to the heart of things—we have to stop thinking about the family reunion rules as an abstract or theoretical issue. We need to stop thinking in terms of targets, quotas and rules and instead start thinking of individuals and families. We need to introduce some humanity into the system.

Last weekend, I was myself part of a family reunion. The whole Carmichael family—three generations of us—gathered on Islay to celebrate my parents' diamond wedding anniversary. As some hon. Members may know, Islay is a small island, but it is home to no fewer than eight distilleries. It is fair to say that we learned some years ago how to have a good party, and last weekend was no exception. I mention this because I think it would help us all, as we approach this subject, to ask ourselves how we feel about our own family. What would we do to keep them together; what would it mean to be separated from them; and how would we feel if that separation was the result of some arbitrary set of rules?

My wife and I have two sons. We have a 15-year-old in secondary school and a 19-year-old in his first year of university study. If I were in this country as a refugee, the 15-year-old would be entitled to join me, but the 19-year-old would not. That reminds me of the Old Testament story of Isaac having to choose between Jacob and Esau. Forcing that sort of choice on people belongs in the Old Testament, not in a 21st-century, modern democracy. My 19-year-old son did not suddenly become a different person when he turned 18. The feelings I have for my 19-year-old son did not change when he became 18, and if I were separated from him, I would feel that separation every bit as keenly as I would if I were separated from my 15-year-old.

I contrast my family's happy weekend with the stories of so many who come here seeking refuge and our help. I am sure that we could stand here all day exchanging anecdotes and personal stories, so I will offer only one example. Muhammed came from Syria. He arrived in the United Kingdom in March 2014. He was granted refugee status in December 2014 and immediately began the process of applying for family reunion. The restrictive family reunion rules mean that the former lawyer—I am a former lawyer myself—his wife and their younger

[*Mr Alistair Carmichael*]

children are separated from the two older children because they are over 18. His oldest daughter, Athar, is currently in Turkey, while his oldest son, Kusai, 19, is in a refugee camp in northern France. The rigidity of the rules means that essentially we are forcing young people to make dangerous journeys to reach their families and safety.

I am grateful to the several campaign groups and agencies that supplied briefing material ahead of today's debate. To pick just one, I am supporting the British Red Cross's Torn Apart campaign. This is my first ask of the Minister today. Will he meet the British Red Cross and the Refugee Council, which have both done so much work directly with the families affected and which know the issue so much better than any of us in the House?

I pay tribute also to UNICEF and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which also provided detailed and substantial briefings for today's debate. I cannot improve on quoting the former. It says:

"The lack of safe and legal routes to Europe, or within Europe, for those fleeing conflict and persecution is forcing children into the hands of traffickers and smugglers, and putting the lives of refugee and migrant children at risk. Restrictions in the current UK refugee family reunion rules for unaccompanied children alongside delays in expediting the Dublin III procedure for family reunion are combining to mean that children are often stranded alone in Europe, or facing even longer stays in makeshift camps, with many risking their lives in efforts to join family members in the absence of a belief that the system will support them."

UNICEF says—this is its first ask in regard to the rules—the Government must provide safe and legal routes to family reunion by applying the UK's rules and practices on refugee family reunion more flexibly and widening those rules to ensure that children can be reunited with extended family members; and by implementing the EU's Dublin III regulation as intended, enabling unaccompanied and separated children to have their asylum applications transferred to countries where they have family members to join. I hope that the Minister will address that ask from UNICEF when he replies to the debate.

Let me turn, then, to the Dublin III agreement, under which children are able to be reunited with their extended family. The UK immigration rules apply to children anywhere in the world and can therefore provide a safe and legal route for children, avoiding the need for them to embark on perilous journeys to Europe. That is in keeping with the Government's own stated policy objectives. However, the UK's own rules on refugee family reunion apply only to spouses or partners and to children under 18 and born before the family fled. There is provision for exceptions to be made outside the immigration rules, but the extent to which children benefit from judgments based on the "serious and compelling family or other considerations" or "exceptional circumstances" test remains unclear, as the Government do not specify which cases involve children. Overall, 175 visas for family reunion under "exceptional circumstances" were granted in the last five years. That is 175 over five years; there were 77 cases in 2011 and the number fell to 12 in 2014. It is worth putting those figures in the context of the upheaval that we have seen during that period.

The rules fail to recognise that after years of conflict, many of these children have been orphaned or otherwise separated from their parents but they may have

grandparents, aunts and uncles or adult siblings in this country who could care for them. Children in that situation would have no choice but to make the dangerous journey to Europe before they would be able to be reunited with their family under Dublin III.

Further, the refugee family reunion rules do not permit a child to sponsor their parent or main carer to join them in the UK. When a child is granted refugee status or humanitarian protection, that is in recognition of the fact that the child cannot live safely in their home country and therefore cannot join their parent there. By preventing children from applying for their parent or main carer to join them in the UK, the rules are enforcing family separation, rather than enabling family reunification, and they risk depriving children of their right to a family life.

It is worth pausing to reflect on what the purpose of the rules should be. It seems to me that if the purpose of the rules is to reunite families, that is exactly what they should do, but the implementation of the rules has exactly the opposite effect. We do not have family reunification rules; we have family separation rules.

The agencies and non-governmental organisations ask that we widen part 11 of the UK immigration rules in various ways. They ask that we include an expanded group of extended family members who have refugee status or humanitarian protection, including adult siblings, aunts, uncles and grandparents, to sponsor the children in their family to join them. They ask that we allow unaccompanied and separated children to sponsor their parent or main carer to join them in the UK, and they ask that we include children born after the family fled from their country of origin. To put it another way, they ask that we start looking at families as families, and not as a disparate collection of individuals connected by consanguinity.

They ask also that we interpret and apply the UK immigration rules on family reunion in a generous and flexible manner, which the Minister will hopefully agree is in the best traditions of the British Government and British civil service. They ask that we promote the protection of children and do not act as barriers to children in precarious situations being sponsored where other criteria such as family relationships and the children's need for protection are met.

They ask that we clarify UK immigration guidance and practices, including in relation to evidential requirements and the definitions of conditions of "serious and compelling" circumstances—again, that is a test—and collect disaggregated data on exceptional cases relating to children outside the UK rules. Their final ask is that we should waive the accommodation and maintenance requirements and the application fee for children falling outside part 11 of the immigration rules.

As a set of rules, the Dublin III regulation has been agreed by 32 countries in Europe to determine the state responsible for considering an asylum application submitted in one of them. Under this regulation, unaccompanied children are entitled to be reunited with family in the UK through the transfer of existing asylum cases to the UK from another EU member state. However, the implementation of Dublin III is far from working in the best interests of the children.

Unaccompanied children across Europe have been understandably reluctant to seek access to the asylum procedure. Such children lack trust and confidence in

the system, and in many cases lack knowledge or the language skills to understand family reunification procedures. Procedurally, the maximum time limit for Dublin III transfers is 11 months, and cases are typically taking that long to be processed. That is far too long for a vulnerable child to wait to be reunited with its family.

The cases of unaccompanied children in northern France are the nearest and most visible of children trapped in vulnerable situations and on dangerous routes who have a legal right to join their families in the UK. Putting an effective, sustainable process in place for the processing of Dublin claims by the UK in northern France and across Europe would ensure that no more of these children are unnecessarily kept in limbo, so close to family and yet so far from safety.

In terms of the implementation of Dublin III, my asks of the Minister are these: the Government should ensure adequate investment and resourcing of the system across Europe, enabling family reunion in the UK, including the deployment of further Home Office staff to Europe. The Government should publish guidance on the handling of Dublin III family reunion cases, including a clarification of responsibilities and procedures for assessing UK-based family members of unaccompanied children ahead of any transfer. At the local level, central Government should ensure that local authorities have sufficient funding and capacity to conduct such assessments to enable Dublin transfers to be expedited while safeguarding the best interests of the child. The best interests of the child is a test that we apply routinely to children in our own legal system. Again, why should we apply a different test to the children who come here in such desperate circumstances?

Working in partnership with other European Governments, the Government should invest in ensuring that unaccompanied children have access to high-quality legal assistance. We will all have seen from our constituency casework the impact that the removal of legal aid from those seeking access to the asylum and immigration legal processes has had over the years. That is now becoming acute and really does need to be addressed.

The Government should ensure that children in Europe have child and language-accessible information about the procedures for reuniting children with their families in the UK via the Dublin procedure. Again, I draw on my own personal experience as a solicitor in practice and previously as a prosecutor. The way in which we provide information to children in dealing with court systems, for example, is light years away from the standard and quality of information that is provided to children seeking refuge here. Why do we treat these children as though they are somehow worth less than our own?

I expect that the Minister will speak about the rules for family reunion visas being granted outside the set criteria in the exceptional circumstances to which I have referred. However, the figures speak for themselves. Given the massive upheaval in the middle east and elsewhere and the vast number of people on the move, the number of visas that have been granted in such exceptional circumstances is painfully low. Refugee family reunion is about protecting lives. It has its basis in refugee law, so it should be considered part of the refugee and asylum process, not just part of the immigration system.

My final ask of the Minister is that we should allow more refugees in through the Syrian vulnerable persons scheme. At the current rate I am not sure how the

Government will meet their own target of 20,000 by the end of this Parliament, let alone do more as we all believe they should. We should take refugees from Europe through our own scheme or by signing up to the European relocation scheme. We should take unaccompanied refugee children who have made the journey alone and are now vulnerable to traffickers in Europe. We should offer safe and legal routes to cut off the air to smugglers and we should do this hand in hand with our European and other international partners. All that would help, but a change to the family reunion rules is the necessary first step. That is the place to start. I look forward to hearing what the Minister can offer us by way of some assurance.

3.18 pm

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is indeed a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate and on his excellent speech. I also congratulate him on his excellent article, which I read this morning on PoliticsHome and which I would commend to other Members of the House. It has been invaluable in preparing for this afternoon's debate.

Few would challenge the reasons why protecting the family unit is a fundamental principle of international law, and international refugee law in particular. As the United Nations declaration of human rights states:

“The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.”

Fleeing persecution should never require a refugee to have to give up that unit and have to choose between safety and family. There is a second fundamental reason for protecting the family unit and reuniting families, which is that family reunion is also about saving and protecting lives, as the right hon. Gentleman argued, because many of those applying to join family members here will themselves be in grave danger. That has never been as true as at present.

Family reunion is about providing safe legal routes to a place of protection. A failure to provide such routes will push many to turn to people smugglers and dangerous routes in an attempt to be reunited with their loved ones here in the UK. I pay tribute to the many organisations that work so hard to highlight the issues. As the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, the British Red Cross has been running a campaign called Torn Apart, which has perfectly captured the reasons why family reunion is so important. The powerful campaign video featuring Muhammed and Amal puts human faces on the numbers and arguments. A UNICEF campaign for reuniting unaccompanied children in Europe with families in the UK has attracted more than 100,000 signatures to a petition. As ever, the Refugee Council has been a persistent advocate of the cause.

The right hon. Gentleman highlighted concerns about the scope of the UK's family reunion rules and problems with how they function in practice, even for those who qualify. As to the scope, he set out examples in which there was a lack of compassion or fairness, including the very restricted provision for children over the age of 18. Similar arguments are relevant to parents, siblings and other relatives. It is only fair to acknowledge that

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there will always be different views as to precisely where lines should be drawn, but I think most MPs and most members of the public would agree that currently the lines are drawn too restrictively.

Nowhere is that more apparent than in the case of adult children. How can we justify a policy by which an 18-year-old woman who was living as a dependent child with her parents and younger siblings in Syria cannot join them in the UK and must instead be left behind, possibly alone, in a refugee camp in Jordan, Lebanon or Turkey? Returning to the principles behind the rules, it is very hard to defend in terms of the impingement on her right to family life and the family life of her parents and children, it is absolutely indefensible in terms of her safety, and it creates a situation in which we can easily imagine that resorting to people smugglers and dangerous journeys would be a significant temptation.

Similar arguments could be made in respect of other relatives too. It is particularly true of child refugees. The UK and Denmark are alone in the EU in not allowing parents to apply to be reunited with them. The Government's justification is child safeguarding, but we do not know what the evidence for that is. In fact, in the recent legal case of *AT*, the President of the Upper Tribunal concluded that the evidence suggested, contrary to the Government's position, that allowing reunification would promote, rather than undermine, public interest in safeguarding of children. Another example is the exclusion of post-flight family. Again, that is a case where the rules appear to run contrary to the principles behind family reunion and protecting family life.

I expect the Minister will highlight the fact that provision is made for adult children and other dependent relatives to join their refugee families in

“the most exceptional compassionate circumstances”.

However, I do not think that is good enough—for a number of reasons. First, it just does not work. From my dim and distant past as an immigration solicitor, I can remember how incredibly difficult it was to have a client meet the threshold of “most exceptional compassionate circumstances”. From the briefings that we have received, that still seems to be the case. Secondly, that test is particularly inappropriate just now. To be living alone, far removed from the family unit that they have previously lived with and that they remain dependent on, is far from an exceptional circumstance for people in the current migration and refugee crisis. If the Minister cannot be persuaded to make a permanent change to the rules, surely he will consider a change to last for the duration of the current crisis. There are other problems with the rules, including the fact that they place financial tests on the refugee family to show they can support their relative without recourse to public funds.

Instead of hearing the Minister highlight the exception that would allow a few dependent 18-year-old children to join Syrian refugee families in the UK—families that they have always lived with—we want to hear him explain why on earth that is an exception in the first place. Why is it not the mainstream principle to allow family reunion in such circumstances? The wording of the exception simply highlights a far better place for lines to be drawn, if lines have to be drawn at all. Dependency and having been part of the household

should be enough in itself. We should take out the financial requirements and the near-impossible task of showing

“the most compelling compassionate circumstances”.

As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland asked, what does that phrase even mean? Does it incorporate the example I have given of an 18-year-old girl alone in a refugee camp in Lebanon?

The right hon. Gentleman also pointed out that when we consider the exercise of discretion outside the rules, it is noticeable how rare an event that is. There have been about 65 cases outside the rules in the last three years, against a background of 20,000 family reunion applications. Such cases are rarer now than they were in 2011. I ask the Minister, as the right hon. Gentleman did, to explain that decline in the number of successful cases outside the rules, particularly given the current refugee crisis. We support hon. Members and campaigning organisations who favour a broadening of the categories of people who qualify under family reunion rules, and we ask the Minister whether he will work with experts, for example from the international Red Cross, and legal experts to broaden the scope of family reunion rules to reach a fairer and more just policy.

I want to echo some of the concerns raised about how the rules work in practice, even for those who are fortunate enough to fall within their ambit. First, it is true that family reunion is far from straightforward. Many require support, including legal support. In Scotland, solicitors can still provide help through advice and assistance funding from the Scottish Legal Aid Board. I can safely say that in my time as an immigration solicitor I never felt I was in any way wasting public funds by providing that service. The evidence gathered by the British Red Cross in its report “Not So Straightforward” backs that up. On the contrary, legal advice and support is often pivotal. I urge the Government to consider a similar scheme in England and Wales.

Secondly, there must be a change to the ridiculous procedure whereby very short entry clearance periods are issued to those seeking family reunion. That often leaves poorer families facing a near impossible task of gathering together funding for travel in the short time allowed. Will the Minister look again at the limited entry clearance period that is granted? Thirdly, we must find ways to make it easier to submit applications. Many applicants, 95% of whom are women and children, are required to travel to third countries to find their nearest British embassy. The Red Cross has highlighted the risks of violence, torture and harassment that a majority face when making that journey, and there is evidence that certain high commissions fail to follow correct practice in dealing with applicants—for example, turning away children in Rwanda because they arrived without passports. Will the Minister work with organisations such as the Red Cross to explore alternative ways of submitting applications?

Fourthly, as all hon. Members will have experienced in general immigration work, there is sometimes—not all the time—an infuriating tendency for entry clearance staff to refuse applications because there is one missing document, or one part of the form that has not been completed properly. Instead of clarifying the situation with a simple phone call, they simply refuse applications and protracted, expensive appeals follow. Can the Minister



ensure that all possibilities of seeking clarification or further information are exhausted before family reunion applications are refused?

Finally, we could have a whole separate debate on the operation of the Dublin regulation and processing of “take charge” requests. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland made many valid points about that. It is pivotal for children—and others—living in the awful conditions at Calais and Dunkirk or in camps in Greece to be reunited with families as quickly as possible. It has been difficult to monitor progress, and some of the answers to parliamentary questions have been frustrating, but we should all be pushing the Government to do everything possible to speed that process up, and we will continue to do that.

The Government have provided protection and shelter for refugees in regions neighbouring conflict zones, and they have done some admirable work in that regard. That is beyond doubt, and other countries should follow that example. However, the Government have also recognised that work in the region is not enough and that offering a place of safety to many is also important. In doing that, surely it makes perfect sense to include the broader set of family members of refugees who are already here. It is the right thing to do to protect people and families, stop perilous journeys and make a just contribution to alleviating the awful crisis that continues to rage.

3.28 pm

**Keir Starmer** (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I, too, congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing the debate and on the tone of his contribution. The reference to his family was a powerful way of driving home the point about the cut-off point at age 18. We often say in the House that there is a refugee crisis on a scale not seen since the second world war—and that is right: we have seen the numbers from last year and this year. However, we have a tendency—into which I myself fall—to talk in terms of numbers. Bringing some humanity to the topic is important, and that is what happened when the right hon. Gentleman spoke.

We must remember that refugees are mums, dads, children, brothers, sisters and grandparents, and are all fleeing from persecution over borders in the best way they can in the circumstances. We do not often refer to them, first and foremost, as families, but they are families who are often disintegrated and split because of the circumstances in which they have to leave a particular country or situation. We must always remember that, as it reminds us why we must always distinguish between refugees and others who move—immigrants in the broader sense of the word. We must recognise that it is a different context and set of circumstances, and that different rules ought to apply. One problem is rules that are intended to apply to immigration broadly being applied to the sub-group of refugees.

We must always remember that refugees come from many countries across the world, not just Syria. We often refer to the situation in Syria because it is so terrible, but there are other countries in which there are terrible situations and from which refugees are on the move. One of my concerns, which I have raised with the

Minister and in the House a number of times, is about the potential in this country for a debate to emerge that takes a two-tier approach to refugees, with Syrians being seen in one context and other refugees in another. We must keep reminding ourselves to bear in mind not just Syria, but the very many other places from which people are fleeing.

Reunification is a particularly good example of rules intended to apply across the board not working well in relation to refugees. That is why I welcome this debate, the campaign being run by the British Red Cross, and the work of UNICEF and the Refugee Council on unaccompanied children and reunification in particular. I echo the comments of other hon. Members: we need to remember that reunification is important because families want to reunify. We live as families and when we are split and have to cross borders, we want to reunify as families. The family unit is a powerful human need. In this context, by having more flexible, wider rules on family reunification, we limit, at least to some extent, the extent to which people make dangerous journeys that they would not otherwise have to make, because they would have a safe and legal route for getting from where they are to where they need to be to reunify with their families. We must bear both those points in mind.

The reunification rules, like many aspects of the refugee framework, are under strain given the events of the last year or two. However, it is time to look again at the reunification rules in the round. I saw for myself the situation in Calais and Dunkirk earlier this year, where it was evident that there were unaccompanied children. When I went to Calais in January, there were about 130 or so unaccompanied children, but at least they had been counted and identified to the best ability of those who were there.

When I was in Dunkirk—things have changed since I was there—nobody was in a position even to identify and count the number of unidentified children there. That demonstrated the mismatch between the approach we have to children in this country and the approach that was applied in Calais and Dunkirk. When I visited, I went on the Eurostar from London and the journey took one hour. It was extraordinary that there should be a place such as Calais or Dunkirk where there were unaccompanied children who were not being assisted in the way that I would hope they would be if they were in the UK.

In the UK, we have recognised for many years that if children are to exercise their rights to reunification—or, indeed, any rights—somebody has to assist them to do so. It is simply not good enough to say to a child, “There is a mechanism. Why don’t you access it?” There has to be somebody to assist in that process.

**Keith Vaz** (Leicester East) (Lab): I am sorry to have missed the opening remarks of the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). My hon. and learned Friend will know from his visit to Calais of the concern about the 157 unaccompanied children, all of whom appear to have links with families in this country.

In the Bishop of Durham’s evidence to the Select Committee on Home Affairs on Tuesday, he said in answer to a question I put that he believed that the children should already be here. Does my hon. and

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learned Friend agree that where links can be demonstrated and have been established—not as a matter of rule, otherwise it will encourage more people just to send their children—the children ought to be allowed to join their families here?

**Keir Starmer:** Yes, they should be allowed to join their families here. The rules provide for that and they need to be effectively applied. That means somebody assisting in the process on the ground. I was particularly struck at Dunkirk that there were simply no officials at all in the camp when I was there. The only officials were gendarmes on the gate, whose sole function was to stop people bringing pallets on to the site, which they wanted because the ground was so wet that they simply needed to get the tents off the ground. That was the only official presence in Dunkirk.

It is not just about the right to reunification; it is about that being within a reasonable timeframe. Months go by and that is a long time for a child. Those children are on their own and they are particularly vulnerable. We have had debates about the number of children missing in Europe; some months ago, Europol put out a figure of 10,000. Time is measured differently by children, as we all know, and those children are not only young, but vulnerable. They should not be in parts of Europe or the rest of the world without assistance. This is about the speed of the exercise.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I apologise for not being here at the start of the debate; I was speaking in a debate on carers in the main Chamber. To follow up the point made by the right hon. Member for Leicester East (*Keith Vaz*), the shadow Minister noted that we need someone in place to help. Almost 1 million Christian refugees have left Syria and have been dispersed not just across Turkey, but across the whole of Europe. Some of those are young families and young individual children. May I suggest that one group that could, should and would be keen to help is the church? Will the Minister, in his reply to the shadow Minister, look at that as a possible solution to trying to find a family background for the many children who have been left on their own and who are isolated and vulnerable at Calais and elsewhere across Europe?

**Keir Starmer:** Of course the churches should, and do, play a part in providing support, as do many others. There are people in the camps across Europe who are trying to provide the best support they can, and that is welcome. It is, of course, a tall order to provide the help wherever it is needed, but that goes to the question of how many staff are deployed and where. In a sense, we need to step back, take a look at the rules and the reunification framework in the round, and review it across the board.

**Stuart C. McDonald:** The hon. and learned Gentleman quite rightly emphasises the importance of time, particularly for children. He will be aware that a few months ago four or five children from the camps were admitted, thanks to a tribunal ruling, on human rights grounds because the Dublin procedure was so slow. Does he agree that one option for the British Government, rather than challenging that decision, would be to implement it more widely? That way, rather than having to wait for

the children to go through the French process first and then make a take-charge request, the children could be brought to the UK straight away.

**Keir Starmer:** That challenge was brought by, among others, lawyers working in Doughty Street Chambers—the chambers that I am still associated with. I think the children arrived in St Pancras, which is in my constituency. That demonstrated how quickly things could happen if a court approved the process. In fairness, it is not for me to tell the Minister what approach the Government should take to the appeal, but clearly speed is of the essence. There have to be practical and effective ways for children and their families to exercise the rights to which they are entitled. It is marked that there are still children relatively near, in parts of northern Europe, who have a right to reunification here but that the process is working far too slowly.

It is often said that when we respond to refugee children on their own, in Europe or elsewhere, there is a risk that if too much is done, it will encourage others to follow their path. I have been very cautious about that argument for two reasons. First, although when we talk about immigration more widely we might have to engage with the pull factor argument, when we talk about refugees we should recognise and focus on the push factors. Refugees are fleeing. Over the years, families have split as they have fled across borders. Secondly, there are children right here, right now who are already on their own in different parts of the world. For my part, and I expect for everyone else, I am not going to say, “We mustn’t extend the support that they need right here, right now lest others follow in their wake.”

**Keith Vaz:** I am most grateful to my hon. and learned Friend for giving way to me a second time. I agree with him, but does he not agree that we need to be careful about messages? The first people who pick up such messages are the people traffickers and the organised criminal gangs, and we simply have not done enough to address those gangs. They are the people who are able to transport individuals, and they are the people who prey on the vulnerable. They never put their lives at risk in the Mediterranean. We and our EU partners, including Frontex, need to do much more to deal with them.

**Keir Starmer:** I heartily agree and endorse every word. Ultimately, the refugee crisis will be addressed effectively only if we start at the very top, which means de-escalating the violence, and then work upstream to stop the work of those who are engaged in trafficking and putting people through the illegal and dangerous routes. I completely agree with that. In a sense, what we are discussing this afternoon is what we do much further down the line, when people and children have arrived in Europe. I am simply cautioning against the argument that has been made in the House when we have debated similar issues—although not in today’s debate—that it would somehow be wrong in principle to provide the support and assistance that is needed in Europe lest other people follow.

The problems highlighted by the British Red Cross’s campaign are real. Where over-18s were living with their family before the family split and fled across the world because of persecution, they are, of course, over the age of 18, but still vulnerable and still wanting to

reunify with their family for the reasons powerfully put earlier in the debate. Refugee children not being able to sponsor family members is an issue where there simply is not sufficient flexibility to address the injustices that arise. There is the unresolved question of wider family members beyond mothers, fathers and children, and there is the problem of there having been no legal aid since 2013. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on legal aid, I take it particularly seriously that since 2013 it has been difficult to mount effective challenges unless lawyers are prepared to act on a pro bono basis, which is not how we should be proceeding on such issues in this country.

Labour has pressed these issues. Our amendment 122A to the Immigration Bill was defeated in the House of Lords, so there have been efforts, but it is good that we are debating the issue again today—not to resurrect those discussions in the other place, but to step back and ask: is it now time for that wider review? I call on the Government to look at and review the entire framework for family reunification, and I ask the Minister to make a commitment to that effect and to update us on the ongoing review of the Dublin III arrangements.

3.44 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Refugees (Richard Harrington):** I add to the small but impressive list of right hon. and hon. Members today who have said what a pleasure it is, as ever, to serve under your jurisdiction, Mr Bone. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate.

My history in the legal profession often feels inadequate in Parliament, but particularly so today. I do not compare in any way to former practising solicitors nor to someone as eminent as the shadow Minister of Doughty Street Chambers and the great office he achieved afterwards. As a mere holder of a law degree, and not a very good one, I have not looked at a law textbook since 1979, but I will do my best.

Family reunification is a serious subject that is easy to paint in terms of good and bad, black and white or evil and nice, and I thank the speakers today for not doing so—it is an easy and very cheap way to attack any Government. With that in mind, I will try to answer the points that I can answer with the same level of constructiveness. Anyone would agree that family unity is an important principle. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland mentioned it in terms of his own family, and I have two boys of a very similar age to his, as does the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). To the many of us who come from a background of people fleeing from abroad, although it was not in our generation—it was several generations ago—it is something that is passed down. When I took up my office in the Government, I did not do so lightly.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael:** That goes to the heart of the debate. It is about how we regard refuge. What does it mean to be a refugee? As a country, what are we offering when we offer people refuge? Surely it has to be more than residence. Surely it has to be some sort of security and stability. How do people get that when their family is split across countries?

**Richard Harrington:** I would find it hard to disagree with that point. I feel, and I hope that most right hon. and hon. Members agree, that this country has a very good reputation for accepting refugees not just historically but in the present day. Although I am sure that no one would suggest that our asylum system is perfect, it has certainly become speedier, allowing people not to live in such lengthy periods of limbo by making determinations comparatively quickly. I agree that those periods can still be shortened, and I hope they will be shortened. I hope that the financial package offered by the Government for the Syrian resettlement programme and other resettlement programmes shows that the Government are committed to enabling people to live proper and decent lives once they arrive here. When refugees arrive here, I agree that hopefully it is job done on human safety, but on their leading fulfilled and proper lives it is the beginning of the end, or the end of the beginning—it is not for me to quote Churchill, or to mess it up, but I hope right hon. and hon. Members will know what I mean. It is the beginning of a process, as the Government have realised in, for example, the funding of the five-year resettlement programme. I hope that many of those refugees and their families will not need the funding, because I hope they will be able to work and get the benefits of life generally, but the Government realise that it is important that that funding is available.

I apologise to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland; the point that I wanted to make about family reunion was that the Syrian resettlement programme is predominantly for families. More than 50% are children, but within family groups. The Government are not completely oblivious to the issue. However, I return to his specific points about family reunion. His first ask was simple compared with the others: would I meet the Red Cross and the Refugee Council? I am happy to meet them, but I do anyway. I am happy to meet them on any occasion; in fact, I would have met most of them this morning, except that I could not have got to east London and back in time for this debate.

If the right hon. Gentleman would like to facilitate further meetings, I am happy to go to them, but I assure him that the Red Cross and the Refugee Council are partners of ours in many things. I know that the Minister for Immigration met the Red Cross to discuss many of these issues today, but I am happy to do so as well.

As part of the latest review of the family reunion policy, we have listened carefully to many arguments in favour of widening the criteria and effectively creating another resettlement programme for family reunion alone. The debates in both Houses during the passage of the recent Bill, and in the wider community—including representations received for this debate—demonstrate the level of compassion felt about the issue. Unquestionably, right hon. and hon. Members have made eloquent and forcible arguments in this debate for doing so.

We recognise that families may be separated by conflict and persecution. It happens quickly, and the speed and manner of it is often not controlled. The motivation of most people is unquestionably just to get to their family in the UK. However, it is easy in discussions like these not to stress that we already do a lot of family reunification. In the last five years, there have been about 22,000 successful cases of family reunification. It is often not mentioned that in our programme for Syrian resettlement, family reunification is a criterion in its own right, quite apart from the other vulnerability criteria for acceptance.

[*Richard Harrington*]

The reunification system takes into account some of the points made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland. It does not involve visiting a British embassy abroad; the point has been made about how difficult and dangerous that can be. It involves registering with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and going through an interview process with the UNHCR, which I have witnessed. It is lengthy, but it is not dissimilar to the type of interview that might happen at Lunar House in Croydon or other centres in the UK. Family reunification is one of the five criteria, even without the other matters. People are then brought here on one of our charter flights and resettled with their family, with an immediate right to work on a humanitarian protection visa. That is often not mentioned in the context of family reunion, but such people are coming through the Syrian system now.

At this juncture, I would like to say in the presence of the erudite and eloquent Chairman of the Select Committee on Home Affairs, the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who came to join us today, that the comment that the Government would probably not make its target of 20,000 during this Parliament is not correct. We are well on track, and we have recently added to the target the up to 3,000 children at risk whom we are taking under the—

**Keith Vaz** *rose*—

**Richard Harrington:** The right hon. Gentleman is hoping to intervene, and of course he will, but I will just finish my sentence—or page, or paragraph, in the hope that we run out of time. Excuse my humour, Mr Bone. That is an additional 3,000 children, not just from Syria and the countries around Syria; it is from the middle east and north Africa as well, and it can include non-Syrians.

**Keith Vaz:** The Minister does not need to carry on talking, because I am rising to praise him. Universally, all those who have dealt with him have pointed out that he has done a great job as Minister for Syrian refugees. Our concern is that speculation about the target is not helped by the Government's refusal to publish figures monthly. The Minister will know that from his last appearance before the Committee. He keeps telling us that the figures will be published in the quarterly results. However, because he is doing a brilliant job, it would help his case if he published those figures more readily so people knew of the good work that is being done.

**Richard Harrington:** I must compose myself after that intervention. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for what he said. It is true that the Home Office publishes the targets on a quarterly basis, but the resettlement targets are broken down—

**Keith Vaz:** They are not targets; they are results.

**Richard Harrington:** I beg your pardon; yes. I meant “results”. The right hon. Gentleman makes me nervous, Mr Bone. I do not know why, because he is a very nice chap and I respect him a lot. The results are published quarterly, and are now broken down by local authority region. That is significantly more information than he felt was previously available.

**Keir Starmer:** I myself have said regularly how good the Syrian refugee proposal is and how well it is working. I agree that the Minister is doing a good job there, and I have said that before. The concern is the other refugees. A Syrian child who came here alone would suffer, not being able to bring their parents here. I am increasingly concerned about that sense of a two-tier approach.

**Richard Harrington:** I have every sympathy with what the hon. and learned Gentleman says. It is a feeling that a lot of emphasis has gone into one programme but not into others. I hope to convince him—if not now, then at other times as the process proceeds—that that is not the case, but it is a perfectly reasonable point to make.

**Stuart C. McDonald:** The key question to which we would like an answer is whether the Minister will at least take away the suggestion that the current approach, in which a child at 17 can apply for reunification but there is an arbitrary cut-off at 18—is sensible. We should consider their circumstances. Did they live with that family beforehand? Are they wholly dependent on the family? Will he at least take that away and work with others to implement a more sensible rule?

**Richard Harrington:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I point out—I was going to mention this a little further on—that there will be revised guidance on immigration rules, and many of the points mentioned in this debate will be taken into consideration. If he bears with me, I hope to satisfy him, if not in content then by showing that I am trying to answer some of the questions raised. However, I must make the point that there are already several ways for families to be reunited and the resettlement schemes are part of that.

Our family reunion policy allows immediate family members of those granted protection here or who were part of the family before the sponsor fled their country to reunite in the UK. It reflects our obligations under the refugee convention. As I have said, we work closely with the UNHCR to include the most vulnerable people in the Syrian resettlement scheme.

The Immigration Act 2016, which passed very recently, announced our intention to resettle from Europe a number of unaccompanied refugee children, mentioned extensively by all right hon. and hon. Members here, particularly the shadow Minister. Under that initiative, we will prioritise family links in the UK. A point has been made about the speed at which family reunification takes place. It has been described as far too slow, and we should do what we can to ensure that the Dublin process works far more quickly for the sake of such children, some of whom the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland has seen on his visits to Calais, Dunkirk and elsewhere. Again, that is not a point that we completely ignore.

At the moment, we are meeting many of the organisations that have been mentioned today and other member states to find ways to make this process much quicker. The Immigration Minister has been in Greece and senior officials have been to Italy and France to discuss how it is done. There is no question about it—we agree that the system has to be speeded up. That is why earlier in the year we sent a UK expert to France and why we now have a permanent secondee in the Italian Dublin unit. Shortly, we will be seconding further

people to Greece. We have already offered 75 asylum and immigration experts to assist Greece in operating the hotspots; 18 have already been deployed and are working there and the rest are in the process of being deployed.

We are really looking at entry clearance timetables, including with the Red Cross, which the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) mentioned. It is open to applicants to tell us when they want the visa to take effect—we are not going slowly. Sometimes there is the implication that we are trying to make the process go slowly to stop people from wanting family reunification.

This is a difficult field. The shadow Minister and the right hon. Member for Leicester East, the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, mentioned people traffickers. There is not a single member of this House who could disagree with anything that has been said about people traffickers. However, family reunification is vulnerable to people traffickers.

For example, we have heard—I accept that this is just the sort of thing that people hear, but it has been heard by people on the ground—that there were 50 people on the Bosnian-Macedonian border who claimed to have the same uncle in a village in Sweden. The people traffickers actually tell people to say that they have family in different countries, even down to individuals. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members would not think that that means that I think “Oh, we shouldn’t have family reunification, because some people try to exploit it”, but it does mean that officialdom has to try to verify carefully that these are genuine family reunification cases.

**Keith Vaz:** I thank the Minister for giving way to me a second time. However, that is the problem with the Turkey deal. The deal—the €6 billion that has been given to Turkey—is a reward for Turkey receiving illegal migrants back into Turkey. Actually, the resources should be directed at ensuring that we deal with the people traffickers. We are still not able to get into Libyan waters in order to deal with the boats in the middle of the Mediterranean. Surely the essence should be to stop people being given false hope and to stop people leaving in the first place by helping the countries that are the sources of these difficulties.

**Richard Harrington:** I agree totally with the right hon. Gentleman. In one of his interventions, he mentioned children in Calais and I will concentrate my remarks on that for the moment. The simple question that he put and that was also put by the shadow Minister is, “Should children be allowed in from Calais where a link can be established?” The answer is, “Obviously, yes.”

The impression given in the media—although not by the speakers today; there is no intention to mislead Parliament—is that we are seeing children in Calais and thinking, “How can we stop them from coming to the UK?” That is not the case. That is why the Government have invested a lot of time and effort working with France. Our officials regularly meet French officials and there are discussions at all levels about how to make this quick. There is now a permanent official contact committee. Since one of our officials was seconded to the French interior ministry, the speed has grown significantly—there is no question about it. The numbers may appear small—

**Stuart C. McDonald** *rose*—

**Richard Harrington:** I will just finish my sentence and then I will happily accept the hon. Gentleman’s intervention.

More than 30 children were accepted between January and April. Many people say that that is totally inadequate and that things are moving at a snail’s pace, but they are speeding up; there is absolutely no question about that. There are many cases now in train and transfers can happen within weeks; there is often an implication that it is months, or even longer.

However, under Dublin, the children need to apply for asylum in France. There is a French NGO that the Government work closely with, called *Terre d’Asile*; my French is appalling, Mr Bone, for which I apologise. It is funded by the French Government, with our help, to help us to do this. No one child or adult need remain in those camps, but it is impossible to know how many children there are who fall within this. Whether there are 50, 100 or 150, the numbers do not matter to us, because we want to get them processed quickly.

There is lots of speculation about numbers; it is very easy for very good organisations and very well-meaning organisations to come up with numbers. There have been surveys and there has been sampling. However, it is our job to ensure that those children who do qualify understand the process and that the process is explained by people who can speak to them in their own language and in a simple manner. I understand that there is a lot of fear among the children about the French authorities and other authorities. In the countries that these children come from, people do not think of authorities in the way that people think of authorities in this country. So there is work to be done. However, the British Government are doing a lot to work with the French authorities. We must remember that they are in France; we are operating overseas and our officials are still UK officials. They are not French officials and we cannot ignore the fact that they are in France.

I apologise to the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East; I will give way to him now.

**Stuart C. McDonald:** I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He has given welcome reassurances that the process of taking children from Calais and Dunkirk has been speeding up. Other Ministers—including, indeed, the Home Secretary—have given such assurances as well. However, when Members submit written questions that ask for hard numbers and processing times, we keep getting answers that say those cannot be provided. An excellent report from the Home Affairs Committee has asked for that sort of information to be made available. Will the Minister encourage his colleagues to ensure that it is made available, so that we can check that these assurances are worth listening to?

**Richard Harrington:** The hon. Gentleman is asking, “Will I encourage my colleagues to disclose as much information as they possibly can?” I think the answer is, “Absolutely. Yes, I will.” I hope that the right hon. Member for Leicester East would agree that more numbers are forthcoming than was traditional under previous Governments, when there was significantly less information on the subject.

Over the last five years, the rate of family reunification has been 4,000 to 5,000 per year, but I see that increasing with the different schemes that are happening. It is for

[*Richard Harrington*]

our Government to help the other Governments in mainland Europe to provide the machinery, so that we can resettle those people more quickly.

One could argue that the Governments of mainland Europe have been so overwhelmed by the numbers that they have not been able to process the unaccompanied children for family reunification. Again, I do not think that that is down to lack of will. I just think that the numbers have completely overwhelmed them. From our end, it is important that we do everything that we can to help them to catch up.

I will go on to the points that have been made about the immigration rules, which enable British citizens and people settled in the UK to sponsor their spouse or partner and children under 18 to join them here. Obviously, they have to make the appropriate entry clearance application and meet the relevant criteria. That is our international obligation. The rules allow those with refugee leave or humanitarian protection status to sponsor a spouse or partner with whom they have formed a relationship after they fled their country of origin. The rules are wider than many would think, but I accept that they are not as wide as many would want. They were strengthened in the previous Parliament. The Government do not accept that the rules are unfair. We believe that they have the right impact and help to restore public confidence in this country in the immigration system.

An important point that was raised several times this afternoon—

**Mr Alistair Carmichael:** Will the Minister give way?

**Richard Harrington:** I will just finish this sentence; it may answer the right hon. Gentleman's question. An important point was raised not about the immigration rules but about those cases outside the rules. The argument has been put forward that, although it is legally within the discretion of officials to go outside the rules, they have not been exercising that discretion. That point has been made several times; my English probably made it sound more cumbersome than I expected it to. Just to reiterate, the point is that there is a power to go outside the immigration rules, but it has not been used a lot. That point was made several times this afternoon. In the next few weeks, the Government will publish a clarification of the immigration rules. I hope that the points where discretion can be and is applied are made clearer. That will help applicants, as well as officials dealing with this.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael:** I understand why the Minister made reference to restoring public confidence in the immigration system, but to pick up the point that the shadow Minister made, conflating refugee and asylum issues with the wider immigration system is not a helpful way of proceeding and does not help public understanding. I understand exactly why the Minister said what he said, but it was a good illustration of the shadow Minister's point.

**Richard Harrington:** I understand the argument that when immigration figures are published, they should exclude refugees and asylum seekers. It is an arguable case, but those people should surely be included within the net number of people coming into the country. For

whatever reason those people come, they are still people coming into the country. In my opinion, that does not in any way take away from the validity of us taking people from the situations they find themselves in abroad.

**Keir Starmer:** It is not just about the inclusion of these people in the number; it is also about having a policy driven by one thing—driving that net migration number down. That is wrong when it comes to refugees, and that is why they should be taken out and looked at separately. The number is self-defining; it is the number of people crossing the border. That is the deeper concern here.

**Richard Harrington:** I understood the point that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland was making. I see the argument to separate the two figures. Those who read the detail of the migration figures—it is a small number of people, and unfortunately most of them are not publishers or editors of national newspapers—see the breakdown beneath. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman and other Members interested in the subject read that breakdown. The point is valid, but however the figures are printed or published, I am afraid the media and so, one has to accept, the general population who get their information from the media will take the number in the round. It is others who accept the breakdown.

So many things in Government are a balance. Most of us who go into Parliament, Government and public service do things with exactly the right intention. That is certainly what I have found in my comparatively short period of involvement. I do not think anyone would become a Member of Parliament or, I specifically hope, a Minister in this field if they did not have a lot of compassion for people desperately wanting to come into this country and others. Everything in Government is a balance, however, whether that is financial or in terms of having some form of policy—not everything can be an exception to that policy, but the policy has to try to allow some exceptions. I believe that the number of people coming in under family reunification from the various sources will increase significantly, but in a proper, measured way. There is flexibility within Dublin and the immigration rules to facilitate that.

I thank right hon. and hon. Members, particularly the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, for bringing these issues before us. I am happy to meet with them or anyone else to discuss this matter.

4.14 pm

**Mr Alistair Carmichael:** I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in the debate, which has been detailed, interesting and measured.

This is not always an easy subject. The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), made the point that what we are doing is discussing the size of the bandage or the sticking plaster, whereas what we really need to do is stop inflicting the wounds that we see in Syria, Libya and elsewhere.

Sometimes it is necessary to have moments of high drama and emotion in our debates; sometimes that acts as a catalyst, as it did last autumn, for some real focus and progress on the issue. When not in the middle of such moments of high drama, however, it is enormously helpful to be able to have debates such as this to engage

in the way that all parties have done this afternoon. I am grateful to all parties, and in particular to the Minister—I think we managed to keep him on his feet for almost half an hour. I am sure, whether informally in meetings or on the record on the Floor of the House, this is an issue to which we shall return.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered refugee family reunion rules.

4.16 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*





# ORAL ANSWERS

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