

**Thursday  
17 November 2016**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 17 November 2016**

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# House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

NEW SOUTHGATE CEMETERY BILL [LORDS]

*Second Reading opposed and deferred until Thursday 24 November (Standing Order No. 20).*

## Oral Answers to Questions

### TRANSPORT

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### High-performance Sports Cars: Rentals

1. **Andrew Stephenson** (Pendle) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to prevent the rent of high-performance sports cars by dangerous drivers. [907292]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones):** The Government are committed to ensuring that courts have sufficient powers to deal with dangerous driving and will soon commence a consultation looking at driving offences and penalties. Rental companies can check Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency driver records and should not be renting vehicles to unsafe drivers. The British Vehicle Rental and Leasing Association has a code of conduct it expects its members to comply with, and, if concerned, the public can contact the BVRLA or trading standards.

**Andrew Stephenson:** In my area, and across the UK, a large number of accidents and deaths have been caused by inexperienced drivers, who often hire high-performance cars for just a few days at a time. Later this month, the *Lancashire Telegraph* will launch a dangerous driving campaign looking at this and many other aspects of road safety. Will the Minister join me in supporting the campaign, which aims to shine a light on what is happening on our roads?

**Andrew Jones:** My hon. Friend makes an important point about road safety, which is a critical issue, because, despite our enviable national record, 1,730 people lost their lives on British roads last year. Media campaigns in this area can be very helpful, so I do, indeed, support the *Lancashire Telegraph* campaign in principle, and I look forward to hearing more when it starts.

**Graham Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): I, too, am supporting that campaign, and we have seen numerous incidents across east Lancashire, but would the Government not accept that one thing that is not helping on motorways is the fact that local government cuts mean that motorway lights are being turned off?

**Andrew Jones:** There is no evidence that any of the changes taking place on our motorways are impacting on road safety; in fact, it is the other way round—our motorways are some of the safest roads on our network, and our network is among the safest in the world.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that anyone with points on their licence indicating a number of offences should be excluded from the rental of cars with above a 2-litre engine? Would he consider co-operation with the police and insurance companies on this issue?

**Andrew Jones:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very interesting point. I do not think we can necessarily exclude people from a marketplace, but, of course, all the rental companies do have access to driver records, and I will take that idea forward.

#### Car Manufacturers: Emissions

2. **Stewart Malcolm McDonald** (Glasgow South) (SNP): Whether he has had discussions with the Attorney General on investigations into car manufacturers and emissions irregularities. [907293]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes):** The Secretary of State has regular discussions with the Attorney General on a range of issues.

The Government take any matters regarding the safety and environmental performance of vehicles on UK roads extremely seriously.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** We hear that quite often, but as consumers in this country look around the world—to New Zealand, Brazil, France, Germany and South Korea—they see action being taken against companies such as Volkswagen, while this Government let people down and drag their heels. Can I hear something firm about what the Government have been doing to take these companies to task?

**Mr Hayes:** The hon. Gentleman underestimates me. It is true that, in a hard world, I have a soft heart, but companies that care less for their workers or treat their customers without integrity will soon learn that, in my velvet glove, there is a steely fist I am not afraid to use. To that end, I have met Volkswagen twice. I am absolutely determined it should meet its legal obligations. It will meet in full the costs that we have endured as a Government. I can tell the House today that I have received a pledge from Volkswagen to pay £1.1 million, which taxpayers have had to spend as a result of its behaviour, and I expect to receive that cheque before Christmas.

**Charlie Elphicke** (Dover) (Con): Drivers have been very concerned by pollution rulings on diesel cars. Would it not be wholly wrong for drivers of diesel cars to be punished for buying cars they were encouraged to buy by the Labour Government?

**Mr Hayes:** It would certainly be right to encourage people to behave in a way that met the Government's objectives for emissions. To that end, my hon. Friend, who is a knowledgeable and assiduous Member of this House, will know that the Government have taken direct action to promote the use of electric vehicles and

to encourage those who choose to purchase vehicles with lower emissions. He is right that we must act with moderation, but, equally, we must act with determination to ensure that our vehicles are as clean as they can be, for it is emissions that lead to particulate material, which we know—this is a matter not of speculation but of evidence—are injurious to our health and wellbeing.

**Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): This is a scandal of huge proportions. Thousands of people have died in this country because of the defeat devices that Volkswagen inserted. The fact is that the European Union's legislative framework is weaker than the framework of capitalist United States. Does the Minister agree that the European Union does not deserve its reputation for protecting the environment?

**Mr Hayes:** I am tempted to say that I find it difficult to believe that anything that emanates from the European Union is virtuous, but I will not say that. What I will say is that the Volkswagen scandal is, as the hon. Gentleman says, unacceptable. It would be unacceptable whether we were members of the European Union or not. There are other aspects to this, however. There is the programme of technical fixes that Volkswagen is engaged in, which I pressed it to get on with. There is also the issue of its legal obligations, which I mentioned a moment ago. Let me also be clear that I have not ruled out a separate investigation into these affairs by this Government, and I have told Volkswagen that.

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am sure that the Minister is aware that modern diesel vehicles have either exhaust gas recirculation systems or diesel particulate filters fitted to stop the emission of harmful gases and particles. Is he aware of the increasing practice among the owners of diesel vehicles, including taxis and buses, of illegally removing these systems and causing these harmful gases to be emitted into the atmosphere? If he is aware of it, what is he doing about it, and if he is not will he investigate it and write to me about the action that he intends to take?

**Mr Hayes:** To write to the hon. Gentleman, who is a distinguished Member of this House whom I met briefly earlier this week, albeit not on these issues, would be inadequate. I will meet him to discuss this matter in some detail, because he clearly has expert understanding to bring to bear.

**Mr Speaker:** I am sure that the hon. Gentleman feels enormously privileged at the prospect of a meeting with the Minister of State, as of course would most sane people.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): I wish he would meet me. Question 3, please, Mr Speaker.

#### **Rail Stations: Disabled Access**

3. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): When he plans to announce the next tranche of railway stations to be provided with disabled access to all platforms; and if he will make a statement. [907294]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport** (**Paul Maynard**): All the funding under the current pot of money for Access for All has been allocated to

stations. We intend to seek further funding for the next rail control period. We will seek nominations from the industry and start to announce the successful projects in 2018.

**Michael Fabricant:** Lichfield happens to be one of the smallest cities in the country, but Lichfield Trent Valley railway station is an important interchange between the west coast main line and the cross-city line that connects Lichfield with Birmingham and with Redditch. Yet two out of the three platforms are completely inaccessible to anybody who is disabled, or indeed anybody who has baggage with them and wants to get to one of those platforms. We were meant to get disabled access in October this year, so when is it going to happen?

**Paul Maynard:** I am glad that my hon. Friend shares my commitment to and passion for improving disabled accessibility. I understand that he has met Network Rail at the station to discuss its plans for the project. It intends to start work as soon as possible and it should take about a year to complete, so I hope it will be seen within a year. Network Rail should appreciate that Access for All projects are as important as any of its major prestige projects.

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): On Saturday there was a tragic suicide at Pencoed station in my constituency. One of the issues is that it has a level crossing, which is the only way in which disabled people are able to go between the lines. It is far too accessible in terms of the station lines, and there is a very high suicide rate. Network Rail has allocated funding via the Department for Transport to improve the level crossing, but I would like to see it closed. Will the Minister meet me to discuss additional funding to try to close off the access at that station?

**Paul Maynard:** I am always happy to meet hon. Members. I know that level crossing safety is a particular concern across the country. Every level crossing has its own characteristics and difficulties, so I am more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss this case.

**Mark Field** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): There is obviously no cause for complacency in relation to disabled access, but it is worth putting it on record that in the past 15 years there has been a sea change on our railways; I certainly see that from a London and home counties perspective. While I hope that we can continue this progress on disabled access, substantial improvements have been made in recent years.

**Paul Maynard:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. He is right to indicate the progress that has been made. However, we cannot accept a situation where some of our busiest stations remain inaccessible, so work will have to continue into the next rail period and beyond. I intend to keep up the pressure on Network Rail and train operating companies, as I am sure Members across the House will, too.

**Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Despite the fact that so many disabled people rely on public transport, the Government have slashed the Access for All programme, which pays for improvements to access at stations, by 40%. Some 19% of stations currently have step-free

access via lifts and ramps to all their platforms. Given that record, we can hardly describe ourselves as an inclusive society when so many stations are inaccessible to disabled people. What representations will the Minister make to the Chancellor ahead of the autumn statement to address that appalling state of affairs?

**Paul Maynard:** I am glad that the hon. Gentleman also shares my commitment to the issue. We have made important progress in delivering improved accessibility at many of our busiest stations, but there is still more to do. I will not pre-empt the autumn statement, however much he might like me to do so, but I will seek more money for Access for All in control period 6 of our rail investment. That will deliver far more accessibility at far more stations.

#### Railways: South-west

4. **Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to invest in the railways in the south-west. [907295]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):** We need to continue to improve transport and rail links in the south-west, and my No. 1 priority is to deal with resilience near the Dawlish sea wall and the Dawlish cliffs. The next stage of the project requires a further £10 million to continue to develop the programme and deal with the issue once and for all, and I can announce to the House today that that funding will be granted and the work will go ahead. That is an important part of ensuring that we protect the essential rail links to the south-west, and I hope that people there will see it as a commitment to making sure that they have a proper transport system for the future.

**Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): That is fantastic news and it shows that this Government really are investing in the south-west. Given that resilience work, will they consider a potential branch line to Okehampton as part of the wider south-west rail package?

**Chris Grayling:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and, indeed, to all my south-west colleagues, who are vociferous champions of the need to make sure that we have the best possible transport links to the constituencies that they represent. I will be very happy to discuss with him the needs of his constituents in Cornwall and, in particular, the potential for improving links to Okehampton.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): The National Audit Office's verdict on the Great Western Railway electrification fiasco was absolutely damning. It described it as

"a case study in how not to manage a major programme."

It is estimated that passenger growth on the line will be 81% over the five-year period leading up to 2018-19. Anyone who uses the line will know how overcrowded it is. What reassurances can the Secretary of State give that there will be an improvement in our area?

**Chris Grayling:** The hon. Lady will not be surprised to learn that I am not happy about the way in which the modernisation and electrification programme has been managed. The NAO report also said that, since 2015, my Department has had a much firmer grip on the

programme. I am still not satisfied with the progress that is being made. New trains will, of course, be rolled out across the network sooner rather than later. I am committed to making sure that the project is delivered and that the improvements it brings will happen for passengers.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement on the Dawlish line, given how vital it is in ensuring that my constituency actually has a train service. Does he agree that it was not acceptable for CrossCountry trains to bury in a lengthy timetable consultation document a proposal to axe virtually all of its direct services between the bay and the midlands and Manchester?

**Chris Grayling:** We have discussed the issue with my hon. Friend. When timetable changes are proposed, it is important that they are as transparent as possible, and I want the cross-country service to grow rather than shrink in future.

19. [907314] **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The NAO says that the Government's very poor implementation of the London and Bristol to Wales electrification project has wasted—wasted—£330 million of taxpayers' money. With funding stretched, will the Government and the Secretary of State accept responsibility for putting the Cardiff, Swansea and south-west improvements at risk for the future?

**Chris Grayling:** My objective is to make sure that the programmes under way are delivered properly, with the benefits delivered as quickly as possible. As I said, I am not happy with what has happened so far. One great irony is that during the Labour party's 13 years in power only 10 miles of railway line were electrified. The other is that at a time when Labour is demanding the nationalisation of the railways, these problems have arisen in the one bit of the railway in the public sector.

#### Transport Infrastructure: North England

5. **Conor McGinn** (St Helens North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve transport infrastructure in the north of England. [907297]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones):** Improving northern transport infrastructure is vital to the success of the northern powerhouse. The Government are committing £13 billion in transport improvements over this Parliament, and we have created Transport for the North, a partnership of key organisations to drive forward a northern transport strategy. Our announcement this week on HS2 phase 2b is further confirmation of our commitment.

**Conor McGinn:** We are told that HS2 will cut journey times from the north to London and therefore benefit places such as St Helens, but surely the real driver of economic growth and regeneration in the north is good transport infrastructure across the region from west to east. When will we see a commitment to, and action from the Government on, connecting our great northern cities and towns to each other, not just to London?



**Andrew Jones:** The action the hon. Gentleman is calling for is already under way, with the electrification of the trans-Pennine rail links, the road investments that are taking place and HS3, which we have called “northern powerhouse rail”. That project is being developed by TfN and we will be seeing its proposals early next year.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Notwithstanding what the Minister has just said, when I attended the UK Major Ports Group reception on Monday evening, the port director for the Humber stressed to me how urgently needed east-west connections from Immingham and the Humber ports to Liverpool and Manchester were. He talked about trans-Pennine tunnels and so on, which are decades off, so can the Minister reassure him that action will be taken immediately?

**Andrew Jones:** I can provide my hon. Friend with much reassurance. I entirely agree on the importance of connecting businesses to our key modes of transport, especially our ports. Developing the connectivity of our ports is a project being taken forward by the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes).

**Mrs Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Liverpool2 has recently opened, with a new deepwater port, which raises the possibility of the whole of the north becoming an economic powerhouse. What can the Minister tell us about plans to improve freight access to ports right across the north, in an integrated approach with road and rail?

**Andrew Jones:** The Liverpool2 development is a very exciting one, opening up the port of Liverpool to 95% of world shipping. Access to the port is, of course, part of the project being taken forward by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State.

**Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): Does the Minister agree it is vital for infrastructure in the north that we electrify the midland main line through the midlands and on to Sheffield on the existing timetable?

**Andrew Jones:** The next stage to Corby is just about to start, but my hon. Friend’s point will have been heard by the rail Minister and I will pick that up with him afterwards.

17. [907311] **Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What progress are the Government making on implementing their new steel procurement guidelines in relation to projects such as those in the north of England?

**Andrew Jones:** Ninety-five per cent. of the steel used on our railways already comes from Scunthorpe, and that is a key part of all of our procurement. We want to see British steel used in our transport infrastructure, and Scunthorpe will of course play a key part in that.

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): By the time HS2 eventually opens from Manchester Piccadilly, it will take some of my constituents, who live within Greater Manchester, longer to drive to Manchester,

especially at peak times, than to travel by train from Manchester to London. What plans do the Government have to improve that?

**Andrew Jones:** It is not as though HS2 is the only investment taking place in the north: more than £1.25 billion is being spent in the north-west on local transport schemes through the growth deal; £800 million-plus is being spent on north-west road schemes; and a further £1 billion is being spent on other parts of the rail network. It is HS2 plus all the other investments that makes the comprehensive transformation of transport in the north.

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree with a group of leading north-west businesses that the gap between investment in north-west transport infrastructure and investment in London transport infrastructure is unacceptably high? Does he agree that if we were to close that gap, we could really transform the commuter services, trams and buses, and we could get the Oyster card of the north, which we so desperately need to transform our transport?

**Andrew Jones:** Transport investments around the country are not necessarily happening at the same pace, but I suggest to the hon. Lady that £340 million is being spent on rail in the Liverpool city region right now, and nobody could really doubt our commitment to the north after this week’s announcements on HS2.

**Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I do not want to prick the bubble of self-congratulation, but new analysis published yesterday by the TUC reveals that the UK ranks towards the bottom of the table of OECD countries for capital investment in important areas of economic development, and worst of all is transport. As a percentage of 2014 GDP—these are the latest figures—UK investment was the lowest ranking, in last place out of 34 countries. With pauses and unpauses, and shunting programmes off into the distant future—be it HS3, northern powerhouse rail, or whatever we want to call it—is it not time that the Government started delivering instead of continually breaking their promises?

**Andrew Jones:** I remind the hon. Gentleman how we collapsed in OECD league tables under the last Labour Government, and that we are spending £13 billion on transport investment in the north during this Parliament, as I outlined earlier.

### Rail Passengers: Delay Compensation

6. **Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): What steps are being taken to improve compensation for rail passengers who experience delays. [907298]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard):** As my hon. Friend will be aware, we recently announced an improved compensation scheme for passengers that will apply if their train is more than 15 minutes late. All franchise competitions let by the Department will include that policy, and we will be exploring how to roll it out for all our existing franchises during this Parliament.

**Amanda Milling:** I thank the Minister for his response. On the Chase line, passengers face not only delays, but cancellations and part cancellations. Services often do not reach the two Rugeley stations, leaving passengers stranded and resulting in overcrowding on subsequent services. Will my hon. Friend outline how the compensation scheme will benefit those who are affected by part cancellations?

**Paul Maynard:** This is the third time that my hon. Friend has brought me to the Dispatch Box to discuss the Chase line, so no one can say that she is not assiduous on the matter. As she may well be aware, if a passenger's journey is delayed by 30 minutes, for whatever reason—be it cancellation, part cancellation or a train turning around short of its destination—they are entitled to claim delay repay compensation. Under the new invitation to tender for the west midlands franchise, we are looking at how we scope the “delay repay 15” scheme, which will be brought in under that franchise.

**Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab):** My constituency is not served directly by the London underground or the docklands light railway, much as we would like it to be, which means that we are heavily reliant on rail services. I receive a stream of complaints almost daily about delays on Southeastern railway. This cannot be allowed to continue, because people are heavily reliant on that service. One thing I would say for Southeastern is that it needs extra capacity—it needs extra carriages. The carriages that become available when the Thameslink programme is complete must be made available for Southeastern so that we can deal with the capacity problem, but we must also deal with Southeastern's performance.

**Mr Speaker:** I think that the question was rhetorical in nature, but if the Minister wants briefly to reply, he may.

**Paul Maynard:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question and look forward to seeing him at our meeting on Southeastern for all affected MPs later this month. He will know the impact that the London Bridge works have had and the extra capacity that they will unlock. We are having a meeting later today with Southeastern to discuss performance issues further, to make sure that we are on top of ensuring that this is an adequate service, delivering for passengers.

**Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con):** However welcome the Minister's response is, given the regularity of interruptions to services—they are primarily the fault of Network Rail—for my constituents travelling to Liverpool Street, the end of the Parliament is too long to wait for this improvement in the compensation scheme. May I urge the Minister to ensure that it is brought in for all rail users across the country as soon as possible, rather than by 2020?

**Paul Maynard:** I share my right hon. Friend's enthusiasm for bringing in the scheme as soon as we possibly can. As he will understand, an in-franchise change involves a more complex commercial negotiation, but that does not mean that we do not wish to do this as soon as we can.

**Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind):** Although Northern Rail is very reluctant to pay out compensation to rail passengers, it is over-enthusiastic about prosecuting

people who have not been able to buy a ticket through no fault of their own. Will the Minister put pressure on Northern Rail to reconsider its approach?

**Paul Maynard:** I am sure that the hon. Gentleman recognises the importance of engaging in adequate revenue protection on the railways, but I accept that when people have inadvertently, for whatever reason, not been able to purchase a ticket, there is a sense of unfairness. I will make sure that I write to Northern Rail and get a reply for him.

### Rail Infrastructure: Sussex

7. **Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con):** What his policy is on improving rail infrastructure in Sussex. [907299]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):** My hon. Friend will be aware that we are making a range of substantial investments on the rail network in Sussex, including in longer platforms on the Uckfield line, a new Thameslink depot and upgraded power systems. That said, I want to be clear that I am well aware of the frustrations felt by passengers in her constituency. Quite apart from the disgraceful and unwarranted industrial action that is taking place at the moment, one of the key issues is that this network is not reliable enough. I give her and her constituents an assurance that I am looking very hard at how to step up a programme of incremental improvements to stop the day-by-day breakdowns that are making the current issues much worse.

**Maria Caulfield:** I welcome the investment in infrastructure, which is causing 50% of the delays. Does the Secretary of State not agree that, in the long term, a second rail main line between Sussex and London is needed to increase rail capacity in the south-east and to improve journey times for my constituents?

**Chris Grayling:** I am well aware of the degree of campaigning behind the Brighton main line 2 concept. My hon. Friend the rail Minister and I have discussed that, and I am aware that a report has sat on the desk for much too long. I intend to make sure that it does not sit on the desk for very much longer.

**Mr Speaker:** Sticking to Sussex, I call Pat Glass.

**Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab):** The Secretary of State will no doubt have seen the “Panorama” programme that was broadcast on 7 November that highlighted the daily hell faced by passengers, especially those using Southern rail on the line mentioned by the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield). Is he content that Southern rail customers are facing this commuting hell every day, or will he act to do something about it?

**Chris Grayling:** No, I am not at all content. Of course, the biggest step that could be taken would be for the rail unions to call off their action so that we can deal with some of the underlying infrastructure problems, which I described a moment ago. One of the things I find sad is that, far from joining us in calling for the strikes to end so that we can improve the situation, Labour Members seem keener to line up with the militants rather than opposing them.

**Pat Glass:** Southern rail was a disgrace before the current industrial action, and it will continue to be a disgrace long after the current industrial action is complete and the dispute is settled. The Department for Transport sets the routes, allocates the franchises, dictates the number of trains that run and sets fare increases, so when will the Secretary of State stop pretending that this is nothing to do with him, stop blaming everybody else around him and act to stop the daily hell on this line?

**Chris Grayling:** I have every intention of addressing the issue and I am working as hard as I can to do so. I would tell Labour Members that figures published this morning show that, across our railways, far more—more than twice as many—problems arise as a result of infrastructure, which is in the public sector, than as a result of train operations, which are in the private sector. Their persistent arguments that nationalising would solve the problems are just plain wrong. We need to invest; interestingly, we, unlike the Labour party, are doing so.

**Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con):** The utility of any rail infrastructure investment on the Brighton main line in Sussex will depend on the trains running effectively through Surrey. Will the Secretary of State undertake to look at proposals from people in my constituency about extra infrastructure investment in Surrey, alongside the Sussex proposals?

**Chris Grayling:** This is a Surrey, Sussex and south London problem, and we must look at the whole thing holistically. My hon. Friend will be aware that I have asked Chris Gibb, a senior rail executive, to look at the issues and to identify ways of addressing resilience problems. He has now put in place detailed plans, and some of that work has already started. For example, a joint team to control the railway on a day-by-day basis was put in place three weeks ago—at Three Bridges, one person will be in charge on a day-by-day basis—and individual infrastructure issues are now beginning to be addressed. I am determined that we do as much as we can, as fast as we can, to improve the resilience of the network.

### High Speed 3: Bradford

8. **Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con):** If he will ensure that trains on the proposed High Speed 3 route stop at Bradford. [907300]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones):** Northern powerhouse rail, which is sometimes called HS3, is the Government's vision for dramatically faster and more frequent rail journeys across the north, to help to build the northern powerhouse and strengthen the British economy. With Transport for the North, we are investigating the benefits, both to passengers and to the economy, of northern powerhouse rail serving key markets such as Bradford.

**Philip Davies:** It is absolutely essential that a city the size of Bradford has a station stop on the HS3 route, otherwise the economic benefits in West Yorkshire will be only for Leeds, which will be like throwing apples into an orchard that is already full. Will the Minister therefore commit to making sure that Bradford is on the route so that the Bradford district can also benefit from the northern powerhouse?

**Andrew Jones:** We are expecting Transport for the North to publish its priorities for northern powerhouse rail development early next year. I will make sure that the voice of my hon. Friend is heard in that planning, and I will keep him informed of progress.

**Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op):** Will the Minister give a good talking to to the infrastructure tsar—who waxed lyrical on the radio this week about how important it was to link Oxford and Cambridge—about concentrating on the links across Yorkshire and Lancashire? That is the emphasis we want. We do not want Huddersfield left off the map on any occasion.

**Andrew Jones:** It is impossible to think that Huddersfield would be left off the map on any occasion. Obviously, we are investing in transport in all parts of our country, including connectivity in the north, and between Oxford and Cambridge.

### Overcrowding: Calderdale Line

10. **Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab):** What estimate he has made of the level of overcrowding on the Caldervale line between Leeds and Manchester. [907302]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard):** I am very aware that that is a busy line, which is why we are seeking to ensure that the new northern franchise tackles overcrowding with investment in new rolling stock that will increase capacity by 37% on peak services into our northern cities. There will be the improvements on the line that the hon. Lady seeks.

**Holly Lynch:** I am grateful to the Minister for that response but, further to the comments made by other hon. Members from the region, HADRAG—the Halifax District Rail Action Group—tells me that two morning trains from Halifax to Leeds have been cut from four carriages to two, leading to quite serious overcrowding. Services connecting our major northern towns and cities are essential to delivering the northern powerhouse, so will the Minister tell me what he is doing to avoid the crush that we are seeing on those commuter services?

**Paul Maynard:** I recognise that we have a number of issues with trains arriving in Manchester and Leeds with passengers standing because of issues with capacity. That needs to change, which is why in the new northern franchise we have ensured that the pacers will be removed, and we are investing in new carriages that will mean more seats for passengers. We are also investing specifically in the Caldervale line. We have just completed work on the west section, and we will start on the east section in the new year. I hope that the hon. Lady will start to see improvements on that particular network soon, not least because that will help to improve connectivity to Bradford as well, which will bring joy, I am sure, to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies).

### Light Rail: Leeds

11. **Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD):** What recent discussions he has had with Leeds City Council on the provision of a light rail scheme for that city. [907304]



**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard):** I have had no such discussions with Leeds City Council.

**Greg Mulholland:** That is a worrying answer. The Government made an excellent decision when agreeing with the inspector that the new generation trolleybus scheme was not right, while allowing Leeds to keep £173.5 million to be match funded with £81 million from local authorities. The Department said that that money was clearly for the right system and that NGT was the wrong one, so does the Minister share my dismay that authorities have failed to consider any other system, and specifically failed to consider light rail?

**Paul Maynard:** We should congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) on his work to ensure that that money was retained in Leeds, but it is now a matter for Leeds City Council to decide the appropriate scheme for Leeds. It is not my role as rail Minister to dictate to Leeds what scheme should be selected.

**Mr Speaker:** Let us hear the voice of Pudsey.

**Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con):** A survey by Rawdon Parish Council showed that Leeds's solution of getting passengers to the airport through the road system would not cope with the number of passengers and where they would be coming from. Surely using money for the road and the £173 million for a rail link to the airport would give us an opportunity to address that problem, and would also be the first stage of the properly integrated transport system that the city deserves.

**Paul Maynard:** My hon. Friend's question demonstrates the range of ideas in the wider Leeds region about how the money can be spent. I understand that the combined authority is also looking at matters. I am more than happy to meet him to discuss such ideas further, but it has to be Leeds City Council that decides what the best option is for Leeds.

**Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab):** Thousands of people in Leeds, and my constituents in Wakefield, use buses to travel to work, school and college every day. In the absence of a new light rail system for Leeds, will the Minister look at the Bus Services Bill, which is about to be introduced in this place, and giving powers to integrate and regulate bus services not just to the metro mayors of Manchester and Liverpool, but to the cities of Leeds and Wakefield? That would have the advantage of not costing the Government one penny piece.

**Paul Maynard:** I recognise the importance of bus services, particularly in many of the great northern communities—they are vital to Blackpool, too. We will have ample chance to discuss the Bus Services Bill in this place, and I am sure the hon. Lady will make her voice heard.

**Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab) rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Wolverhampton has much to commend it, but it is a long way from Leeds.

**Rob Marris:** It was about rail.

**Mr Speaker:** This is about light rail schemes for the city of Leeds, which is a very considerable distance from the constituency so ably and eloquently represented by the hon. Gentleman.

### National Minimum Wage: Seafarers

12. **Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD):** What discussions he has had with officials of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs on enforcement of the national minimum wage for seafarers employed in the North sea. [907305]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes):** The right hon. Gentleman will know I am a proud trade unionist. This is an area of great concern to me. I have met my friends in the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, and Nautilus International—I have Nautilus' charter with me. My officials have been working closely with officials in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and HMRC, as well as stakeholders, on the application of the national minimum wage to seafarers in UK waters more generally.

**Mr Carmichael:** I am grateful to hear that the Minister is taking this matter seriously. It surely cannot be right for HMRC to deem that a ferry service that starts in Aberdeen and finishes in Lerwick is operating wholly outside UK territorial waters. It is nonsense for the body that is supposed to enforce the minimum wage to be undermining it in this way. Will the Government do something to stop this?

**Mr Hayes:** I worked with the right hon. Gentleman in government and he knows of me what I know of him, which is that he does his homework. I have the statutory instrument and the original legislation in my hand as I speak. Let me tell him this: I am committed to reviewing the legislation to ensure that it applies to the offshore sector.

### Heathrow Airport Expansion

13. **Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP):** What steps the Government are taking to ensure that air connectivity between Northern Ireland and London is improved by the proposed expansion of Heathrow airport. [907306]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):** Heathrow airport expects to add six more domestic routes across the UK when the new runway opens in the middle of the next decade. This will strengthen existing domestic links to regions such as Northern Ireland, Scotland and the north of England, and allow the development of new connections to regions such as the south-west. We expect Heathrow to meet these pledges. We will ensure that the Government hold the airport to account; that is an obligation, not a desirable.

**Ian Paisley:** I thank the Secretary of State for that excellent answer, and for the hope and expectation contained therein. Is he, like me, taken aback by the EU's decision to block a multimillion pound aid package to United Airlines, which has effectively removed one of

our air carriers out of Northern Ireland? Will he investigate who lodged the complaint to the EU that has effectively destroyed this business in Northern Ireland?

**Chris Grayling:** I fear it probably will not tell us, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the decision was deeply unwelcome. My Department spent a fair amount of time working alongside the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Executive on trying to make sure that we sustained this route for Northern Ireland. The loss of the route because of EU action is deeply unwelcome and precisely the kind of unnecessary decision from Brussels that led this country to vote to leave the European Union.

**Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Could air connectivity between Northern Ireland, Heathrow and other parts of England be improved by changes to air passenger duty, especially in response to the impending cut to APD in Scotland?

**Chris Grayling:** My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer is listening carefully to representations on this issue. The Scottish National party stood on a platform of getting rid of air passenger duty in Scotland, but it is now discovering that it is more difficult to make ends meet than perhaps it had previously realised. That is one of the challenges of actually having to take decisions, rather than just talking.

**Ms Margaret Ritchie** (South Down) (SDLP): What further discussions have taken place with the Treasury and the Northern Ireland Executive on lowering air passenger duty to underpin our local economy?

**Chris Grayling:** The Treasury has held detailed discussions about this, and lots of Members representing different parts of the United Kingdom have made representations, but I fear that it is a matter for the Treasury to indicate whether it plans to do anything in response.

**Danny Kinahan** (South Antrim) (UUP): Lord Empey's Bill in the other House would have guaranteed slots to Northern Ireland. As the Secretary of State knows, air connectivity is very important to us, but the Bill fell because of EU regulation. Can we ensure that it is put back after Brexit?

**Chris Grayling:** We have to be quite careful about the mechanism. I am not personally of the view that the solution is just about slots. There are slots at inconvenient times of the day. We want connectivity at times that maximise benefits to the regions of the UK, so that Northern Ireland, Scotland, the south-west and the north of England have proper, good, effective international links. My commitment to the hon. Gentleman and to the House is that we will ensure proper protection for that connectivity, but the actual mechanism needs to await more detailed work.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Just to correct the Secretary of State: it is Ruth Davidson and the Tories who are trying to stop the APD cut in Scotland.

Additional regional capacity is of use only if there are airlines willing to fill it. The lack of a Brexit plan has seen businesses literally in flight from the UK. For

instance, easyJet has confirmed that it is in the process of setting up a separate airline based on the European mainland. It said:

"We are not saying there will be no agreement. We just don't know the shape or form. We don't have the luxury of waiting"—and neither do we or those counting on these services. What is your plan?

**Mr Speaker:** I do not have any plan on this matter. The hon. Gentleman is a well-meaning fellow, but the question was too long.

**Chris Grayling:** Let me tell the hon. Gentleman who does have a plan. Bombardier has a plan: it is now investing in a major international rail hub in the UK based on the excellent work in Derby. Nissan has a plan: it is expanding its plants in the north-east. Honda has a plan: it is investing more money in Swindon. Google, Facebook and Apple have plans: they are opening new headquarters in London. In an economy that continues to grow well post-Brexit, that proves that this country will do well regardless.

**Mr Speaker:** Hoping for laser-like precision and succinctness, I call Mr Drew Hendry.

**Drew Hendry:** Instead of deflecting, will the Secretary of State at least agree to a meaningful update of route development and assistance for supporting additional services on existing routes, as well as new services, and—crucially—will he bring forward, before March 2017, firm proposals for specific airport-to-airport public service obligations?

**Chris Grayling:** The Government have not shied away from public service obligations when necessary—most recently, between Londonderry and Stansted airport. There are routes in and around the UK that are essential to the maintenance of our regional economies, and we have always been committed, and will remain committed, to ensuring that those obligations are met when necessary.

### Electric Vehicles: Charge Points

14. **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): What assessment he has made of the level of availability of charge points for electric vehicles. [907307]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes):** The UK now has 11,000 publicly accessible charge points, with Europe's largest network of rapid charge points and provision at 96% of motorway service areas. We will continue to support the roll-out of electric vehicle charging infrastructure to ensure that we realise our ambition that almost every car and van on UK roads is a zero-emission vehicle by 2050.

**Jeremy Lefroy:** I welcome the Minister's reply. I also declare an interest: I am in the process of buying a Nissan Leaf to show my support for Nissan's welcome investment in electric vehicles and indeed in other vehicles. Will the Minister explain how he is looking to support small businesses investing in electric vehicles for their staff and their businesses?

**Mr Hayes:** I am delighted that my hon. Friend is taking that step. I had the joy of driving a Nissan Leaf for the first time last week, and I know that he is as committed to this cause as I am, but he asked a very particular question. Disraeli said that justice is truth in action. Now, I am going to offer him some justice for those who want to get this right. I am pleased to inform the House that the £7.5 million grant scheme for charge points at workplaces will be rolled out—applications will begin—this Monday.

**Mr Speaker:** I think that we can agree that Disraeli did not drive a Nissan.

**John Pugh** (Southport) (LD): Sorry to break the consensus, but is there not a danger of the Government putting too much emphasis on electric vehicles and not enough on liquefied petroleum gas and hydrogen cells, which do not require the same level of infrastructure?

**Mr Hayes:** The hon. Gentleman is right that technology is changing in all kinds of ways, and there will be all kinds of results from that in respect of the zero emission ambition that I set out. The electric vehicle developments that I described, and to which the hon. Gentleman referred, are important. The Government's role is to make sure that we do what we can to make them as attractive to consumers as possible. Charge points are at the heart of that.

#### Leaving the EU: Passenger Rights

15. **Roger Mullin** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the protection of passenger rights in the UK. [907309]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes):** The Prime Minister has made it clear that we will convert existing EU regulations into UK law when we leave the European Union. Once the great repeal Bill is given Royal Assent, Parliament will be free—subject to international agreements and treaties with other countries and the EU on matters such as trade—to amend, repeal and improve any law it chooses.

**Roger Mullin:** The collapse of low-cost holidays this summer emphasises the importance of the EU package travel directive, which offers consumers protection in the case of insolvency. Can the Minister give me a guarantee that any rights to which UK passengers are currently entitled will not be eroded by Brexit?

**Mr Hayes:** The hon. Gentleman must understand that this Government remain entirely committed to putting passengers at the heart of our transport policy and ensuring that we have the right regime for passenger rights. In the end, it comes down to this simple fact. As Ruskin said, quality is never a matter of accident, but the result of intelligent effort. I believe in the determination of this House to do right by passengers. If the hon. Gentleman does not believe that, I suggest that he comes into the new light of the dawn of our leaving the EU rather than staying in the murky darkness of Scottish nationalism.

#### Topical Questions

T1. [907282] **Jim Fitzpatrick** (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):** In the wake of last week's dreadful accident in Croydon, I would like to start this topical questions session by paying tribute to the British Transport police, for which I have ministerial responsibility, to all the emergency services and to the transport staff who worked so hard in the aftermath. I want to send all the good wishes of this House to those injured and our condolences to the families who tragically lost loved ones.

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** Recently published annual figures for those killed or seriously injured on our roads at the end of the second quarter of 2016 show a 3% increase on last year. For the third year running, deaths are higher than they were the year before and went up by 2% last year and this year. Thirty deaths may not sound that many out of 1,800, but for every grieving family, they are a tragedy. What is the Government's plan to arrest and reverse this disturbing trend?

**Chris Grayling:** Of course every death on our roads is one death too many. It has to be said that our roads are among the safest in Europe and the world, but that is no reason for complacency. A trend in the wrong direction is an unwelcome one. The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), who is in his place alongside me, has responsibility for road safety. He is actively engaged, and will continue to be actively engaged, in looking at measures we could take that will improve things. We will look at different investment measures and different ways of educating motorists and those using the roads, and we will work with anyone who can come up with suggestions about how we can improve the situation.

T4. [907285] **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): The case for a Shipley eastern bypass was first made in the Airedale masterplan many years ago. The Government say that it is a matter for the West Yorkshire Combined Authority, while the West Yorkshire Combined Authority and Bradford Council say it was the Government rules on return on investment that made the scheme an impossibility. Will the Minister get together with the West Yorkshire Combined Authority and Bradford Council to make sure that this scheme can become a reality for the benefit of my constituents and the local economy?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones):** I am fully aware of the merits of the scheme, and I will make sure that officials from the Department, the West Yorkshire Combined Authority and Bradford Council sit down to sort this out. There is no reason why Government mechanisms for approval should hold back schemes in Bradford. We are seeing schemes progressing all over the country, so I shall make sure that Bradford knows what to do so that the people of Bradford can see the investment they need.



**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): May I associate Opposition Members with the Secretary of State's comments about the tragedy in Croydon?

The latest statistics from the Department for Transport show a marked decline in bus patronage across the whole country—a drop of some 3%, along with a drop of 2% in bus mileage. Given that we are trying to get passengers out of cars and on to buses, is this not a mark of Government failure? What is the Secretary of State planning to do about it?

**Andrew Jones:** We are, of course, maintaining our support for buses, which we see as the workhorses of our public transport system. They make more than 5 billion passenger journeys per year, compared with 1.7 billion on our railways. We are maintaining, for instance, the bus service operators grant and the £1 billion for the concessionary bus pass scheme, and the Bus Services Bill will be introduced next week.

**Daniel Zeichner:** I rather expected the Minister to refer to the Bus Services Bill. Given that franchising is the answer, why is he denying the choice to many swathes of the country? Why cannot parts of England which do not take on elected mayors—and which are represented largely by his own side—have powers to improve their services as well?

**Andrew Jones:** I think the hon. Gentleman is mistaken when he says that franchising is the answer. All the conversations that I have had with local authorities have produced a mixture of solutions, but most of have focused on partnerships: good partnerships between local authorities and bus companies which will meet local needs.

T5. [907286] **Mrs Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): At the request of the HS2 Committee, to ensure compliance with the aim to achieve

“no net loss in biodiversity”

during the construction of the project, Natural England produced a report on the subject. The Department appears to be dismissing that report, if the brevity of its response is anything to go by. Will the Secretary of State undertake to give detailed consideration to fulfilling Natural England's recommendations, and will he put the protection of our ancient woodland at the top of his list of priorities?

**Chris Grayling:** I have looked at the report, and I recognise the importance of protecting our biodiversity. Our country is probably more covered in woodland today than it has been for many centuries in our history, and I find it encouraging that organisations such as the Woodland Trust are continuing to plant the forests and woods of the future. However, I am sceptical about a 1:30 ratio which appears to be based on nothing more than a gut instinct. I am not sure that that is an appropriate way of dealing with the issue. What is important, to my mind, is replacing lost woodland with extra planting, and following a “finger in the air” formula may not be the best way of doing so.

T2. [907283] **Robert Flello** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Many logistics organisations, such as the Freight Transport Association, are doing excellent work in

trying to establish what the most important parts of British industry need from Brexit, but what is the Department doing to ensure that the important views of the smallest operators—single owner drivers, for example—are heard and given equal weight to those of the largest businesses? Will the Minister's officials meet me to discuss mechanisms that would allow their views to be heard?

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes):** The hon. Gentleman has already attended a round table discussion with me on just such matters, and I believe he will be attending another this afternoon. I am spending more time with him and the truckers than with almost anyone else. He can be assured that the case that he makes is dear to my heart, and that it will inform Government policy. He is right to say that we need to look after the smaller operators as well—he has taken a proud and informed stance on that—and I will ensure, through him and through other mechanisms, that they are involved in the discussions.

**Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): As my hon. Friend knows, rural Wales is the most beautiful part of any country in the world to drive through. I wonder what more he can do to press the Welsh Government to improve investment in roads in my area, so that our world-class countryside is accessible via a world-class road network.

**Andrew Jones:** I do indeed know how beautiful rural Wales is, and my hon. Friend is right to stress the importance of good connections to the tourism industry. I, too, wonder what I could do to press the Welsh Government. Perhaps we could simply highlight to the people of Wales the greater priority placed on investment in infrastructure by Conservative Governments.

T3. [907284] **Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's positive comments about the quality of British steel, and the fact that 95% of steel in rail is UK steel. Does he believe that that record will be matched by the steel used for HS2?

**Chris Grayling:** Absolutely, but that does not apply only to the steel industry. I believe that HS2 is a great engineering project for the United Kingdom, and I was pleased to note a substantial British presence in the first set of contracts that we announced this week. I have made it very clear that the firms that hope to participate in this project should expect to leave a skills and expertise footprint behind in the United Kingdom, and that those that fail to do so should not expect to find themselves at the front of the queue when it comes to contracting.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): On the midland main line, East Midlands Trains often gets it in the neck for train delays when often the responsibility is failures by Network Rail. Will the Secretary of State and the rail Minister design a rail compensation scheme that sends the correct signals to Network Rail to raise its game?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard):** I recognise the situation my hon. Friend describes. We have a number of compensation schemes



operating within the rail industry focusing on schedule 8 payments. I recognise the need to make sure that that remains a very clear system for passengers to understand why delay attribution occurs and recognise that there is much work to be done.

T6. [907287] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Deep in the Airport Commission's papers is the hugely costly and disruptive proposal to double the capacity of the M4 at its London end with a tunnel coming up in Brentford or Chiswick. Will the Secretary of State confirm the Government's estimate of the cost of service transport infrastructure needed for a third runway at Heathrow, and what proportion of that will Heathrow airport be required to pay?

**Chris Grayling:** There are two separate issues here. Improvements are needed to local roads in west London, and the M4 is one of those where plans are afoot now to deliver improvements way before we have a new runway in place. Heathrow airport will be expected to pay for the infrastructure improvements directly linked to the new runway. There are of course other improvements, such as M4 improvements, that are not directly linked and that have for some while been envisaged as part of the ongoing road improvement programme this Government are pursuing. My commitment is that where a transport improvement is required to make the third runway possible, that will be met by Heathrow airport.

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I thank the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), for his commitment to tackling illegal HGV fly-parking across roads in Kent and throughout the country. Does he agree that ending this blight requires not only more lorry parking spaces, but more effective enforcement?

**Mr Hayes:** My hon. Friend knows I have also held a round table on that issue—as I have said before, my table is ever more round and I always welcome hearing from hon. Members across this House. My hon. Friend has made this case forcefully; she has done so at Westminster Hall and again today. She is right that we need to look at these matters because they affect local residents in exactly the way she said. We want to get a balanced package for HGVs, but a package that takes account of the overtures my hon. Friend has made in the interests of her constituents.

**Rob Marris** (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): When the Minister has discussions with Leeds City Council about the light rail scheme, will he also discuss trolley buses? I drove a trolley bus for three years; they are very

efficient and are a lot cheaper in infrastructural costs, and it would be a lot cheaper for Leeds and elsewhere if we had trolley buses rather than trams.

**Paul Maynard:** The hon. Gentleman does not need to localise it any more to Leeds or Wolverhampton. I am in constant discussion with UK Tram and am very keen to lower the cost of all options, whether it be light rail, tram, train or trolley bus, but it is for local councils to decide on the most appropriate scheme for their local area.

**Mr Speaker:** I never cease to be impressed by the varied life experience of the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris).

**James Heapey** (Wells) (Con): Does the Secretary of State share my concern that the reduced growth deal 3 offer made to the Heart of the South West local enterprise partnership has threatened a number of important road and rail improvement schemes in Somerset? Does he also agree that driving growth through improvement to transport infrastructure should trump the devolution agenda?

**Chris Grayling:** First, it is important that the funding we allocate to different parts of the country delivers real improvement, whether to congestion and connectivity, economic development or housing. I met the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government earlier this week to discuss the issue. No offers have yet been made on funding to LEPs; that will happen shortly.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The electrification of the line to Hull was included in the Government's northern transport plan published in March. The hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), now the Minister for the northern powerhouse, said:

"The problem if you are not included in the electrification is the risk that you then become just a shuttle service connecting into the main line."

So can the Secretary of State explain to me why yesterday the decision was made not to include the electrification of the line to Hull, and to leave the TransPennine electrification finishing at Selby, 30 miles outside Hull?

**Chris Grayling:** The train companies got there first, and the good news for Hull is that both Hull Trains and TransPennine Express are going to be running on this route with new generation state-of-the-art hybrid trains that will run on both electric and diesel, and will connect Hull across the Pennines and connect Hull to London. That is good news for the passengers.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am sorry, but we must move on.

## Chagos Islands

10.35 am

**Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to make a statement on the future of the British people of the Chagos Islands and the British Indian Ocean Territory.

**The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan)**: The islands of the Chagos archipelago have been British territory since 1814, when they were ceded to Britain by France. In 1966, the UK agreed with the United States to make the British Indian Ocean Territory available for the defence purposes of the US and the UK, and the Chagossian people were removed from the islands. Like successive Governments before them, this Government have expressed their sincere regret about the manner in which Chagossians were removed from the British Indian Ocean Territory in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is right that the UK Government paid substantial compensation to Chagossians—nearly £15.5 million in current prices—and the British courts and the European Court of Human Rights have confirmed that compensation has already been paid in full and final settlement.

We must now look forward, not back, on decisions about the future of the British Indian Ocean Territory. The Government have considered this complex issue very closely and carried out an independent feasibility study of the practicalities of resettlement and a public consultation, which sought better to gauge the demand for resettlement by illustrating the most realistic way in which resettlement would hypothetically take place. The Government have looked carefully at the practicalities of setting up a small remote community on low-lying islands and the challenges that such a community would face. We were particularly concerned about the difficulty of establishing modern public services, about the limited healthcare and education that it would be possible to provide—which would create difficulties for any new population and especially for elderly Chagossians returning to the islands—and about the lack of realistic economic opportunities.

The Government have now considered all the available information and decided against the resettlement of the Chagossian people on the grounds of feasibility, defence and security interests, and the cost to the British taxpayer. Although the Government have ruled out resettlement, we are determined to address the aspirations that drove Chagossians to seek to resettle—for instance, their desire for better lives and their wish to maintain a connection to the territory. To meet those aspirations, the Government are creating a significant and ambitious support programme to provide Chagossians with better life chances and developing an increased visits programme. The British Government intend to liaise with Chagossian communities in the UK and overseas and to work closely with the Governments involved to develop the kind of cost-effective programmes that will make the biggest improvement in the life chances of those Chagossians who need it most.

**Andrew Rosindell**: I thank the Minister for his reply, but does he not understand the shock, anger and dismay among members of the Chagossian community in the United Kingdom, in Mauritius and in the Seychelles

who were displaced from their homeland in the 1960s at the Government's decision not to allow resettlement? Does he not realise that they are British subjects who are entitled to the same rights, freedoms and self-determination that all British citizens should have? How can the Government defend the right of self-determination for the people of the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar and other British overseas territories, while completely denying the same rights to the people of the Chagos Islands?

Why have the Government ignored the arguments put forward over the years by the all-party parliamentary group on the Chagos Islands and by experts concerning viability, sustainability, cost, funding, defence and security, international human rights obligations and the views of the courts, which since 2000 have deplored the treatment of the Chagossians? Have the Government properly considered the Supreme Court conclusion that, in the light of the KPMG study, maintaining the ban on Chagossian return might no longer be legal?

Does the Minister accept that the United States was not opposed to resettlement and that any security concerns would be easily manageable, just as they are when indigenous people around the world who live around military installations are accommodated? Will he clarify whether the right of abode, which is different from resettlement, can be restored, giving Chagossians the right to visit their homeland whenever they wish? Does he not see that this decision continues to undermine the United Kingdom's human rights record and the British sense of fair play? Why should Chagossians, who are British, be treated any differently from other nationals of overseas territories? How does this leave the Government's so-called "unwavering commitment" to human rights?

British Chagossians should have the right of self-determination that is afforded to all Her Majesty's subjects, who rightly expect the protection of the Crown, which is being denied to the Chagossians today.

**Sir Alan Duncan**: I fully accept my hon. Friend's passion on this subject, which he has demonstrated for many years. He has become a champion of this issue. However, as he will appreciate, the Government and I do not agree with many of his points. First, we do not consider that the right of self-determination actually applies to the Chagossians. In fact, the issue here is one of sustainability and viability—[*Interruption.*] Well, let me go into that.

When I was an International Development Minister, looking at communities such as the Pitcairn Islands, one needed to appreciate that it is demographically difficult to sustain a population of that size in such a remote area: services cannot be provided; the travel distances are enormous; and the costs are quite significant. The costs here have been estimated to vary between £55 million for a mere 50 people and something like £256 million for 1,500. The obligation on Her Majesty's Government to pay on an annual basis the costs of sustaining the population would be triggered. When no hospital is available and when care cannot be delivered urgently, it is unsustainable to expect a community of any such size to exist in such a setting.

**Emily Thornberry** (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. After four decades of intense debate on the

disgraceful relocation of the Chagossians, after the campaign for their resettlement and after all the legal disputes, the marches and rallies, the parliamentary debates and the reviews and inquiries, it is disappointing that the Government thought they could deal with the issue with a 500-word written statement in the other place yesterday.

After KPMG provided a comprehensive analysis of the resettlement options, why have we not at least seen an equally detailed evaluation of those options from the Government, so that we can understand the rationale behind the decision? We are told that cost is one of the three factors, but that comes from a Government who have spent £285 million building an airport on St Helier—[HON. MEMBERS: “St Helena.”] Whether it is called St Helier or St Helena, the fact is that we have spent £285 million on an airport where it is impossible to land planes. If cost is of such importance, let us put it in that context. If the Government are prepared to spend such amounts on an airport that does not work properly, why not evaluate this situation in those terms?

We are told that the agreement with the United States on the Diego Garcia military base is another factor, but that agreement is due to expire at the end of this year. Has the Minister even discussed with the incoming US Administration whether the renewal of the agreement could be made conditional on both parties facilitating the resettlement of the Chagossians?

Finally, we are told that feasibility is also a factor, but why has that not been tested by means of a pilot programme of relocation, as considered by KPMG? The treatment of the Chagos islanders is a dark stain on our country's history. Yesterday's decision, and the manner in which it was made, has done nothing to remove that stain. It is another disgraceful attempt to cover it up, but it will not be covered up. The Chagossians can be assured that the Opposition, led as we are by someone who has campaigned for them for 30 years, will never give up on their right to return.

**Sir Alan Duncan:** May I at least agree with one thing the hon. Lady said, which is that we all deplore the relocation that took place in the 1960s, and the manner in which it took place? That is why compensation has been paid to those who were displaced in that manner. May I also point out that the written statement yesterday was not in another place, but here in this House of Commons?

**Emily Thornberry:** Yes, it was.

**Sir Alan Duncan:** The statement goes out in parallel to both Chambers. Perhaps the hon. Lady would like to learn something about how parliamentary procedure works. It went out at the same time.

The Government have been looking at this issue for more than four years, and the decision was made at Cabinet level by appropriate Ministers. During that process, there has been a full consultation. Perhaps I should point out that, of those invited to express a view, 832 people answered. When it was described what life on the islands would look like, only 25%—approximately 200 people—indicated that they would like to go to reside on the islands. As for Diego Garcia, the hon. Lady needs to appreciate that the Chagos Islands, or the British Indian Ocean Territory, comprise 58 islands—it

is not just Diego Garcia. The agreement is likely to be renewed before the new President comes in and is expected to continue—indeed, it will continue—until 2036.

**Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con):** It has been my privilege, since 2010, to represent one of the largest communities of the Chagos Islands anywhere in the world—it is certainly larger than that on the Chagos Islands. I have pursued this issue since before being elected to this place and it has been my honour to do so. I believe that the Chagos islanders have a right of return, and I am very disappointed with yesterday's statement by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I note that a compensation package of £40 million over 10 years has been proposed. Can the Minister say a little bit more about how that will be spent in local communities such as mine in Crawley? And rather than just regretting the forced eviction of Chagos islanders from their homeland, will the British Government now apologise?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** Yes, I am very prepared to—and do—apologise. That is why compensation has been paid, and the matter has been recognised by the courts. My hon. Friend, who has a large Chagossian population in his Crawley constituency, has taken a keen and proper interest in this issue ever since he was elected. That must be respected, as must his views and opinions. He has touched on something that is very important, which is that, in looking forward, the Government intend to allocate £40 million, shared between the Department for International Development and the Foreign Office, to address the needs of Chagossians wherever they are—whether in Mauritius, the Seychelles or the United Kingdom. In respect of how that will be paid, some of it will qualify as official development assistance—the DFID element—and the rest will do lots of other things in conjunction with the communities and with the Governments in the countries in which they reside. I very much hope that this £40 million over 10 years will be well spent and particularly address the needs of those older Chagossians, who might have been displaced in the '60s and '70s, but who are still alive and who are perhaps the ones in greatest need.

**Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP):** Has it occurred to the Minister that, in the era of President Trump, an island group in the middle of the Indian ocean, thousands of miles from anywhere, might be one of the safer and more desirable places on this planet? In the late 1960s, the community on the Chagos Islands was fully employed and perfectly sustainable. How can the Minister seriously argue now that it would not be so in modern times, particularly with the advantage of an airport with a very long runway? Finally, the Minister has said that the right of self-determination does not apply here. Why exactly is that? The shame of successive Administrations is not something to do just with the 1960s and 1970s. It covers the past 15 years, where successive Administrations have used every effort through the courts to block and tackle the rights of the Chagossians, including the use of the royal prerogative, disgracefully, against Her Majesty's subjects. Instead of apologising for the past, will the Minister properly address the future and allocate to these people their right of self-determination and their right of return?



**Sir Alan Duncan:** The right hon. Gentleman's reference to the runway refers to only a very small part of the archipelago, where there are 58 islands. There is no obvious manner in which a few people on low-lying islands will be able to sustain themselves economically without outside help.

As for what the right hon. Gentleman describes as the runway, and hence implicitly Diego Garcia, the nature of the employment there did not prove attractive to those Chagossians who were consulted, because in most cases they are people who cannot take their families and work in a solitary manner, and they did not find the likely package of employment attractive. The right hon. Gentleman may shake his head, but that is the response that came through in the consultation.

On self-determination, the legal advice that we have received is that the Chagossians were not and are not a "people" for the purposes of international law and hence self-determination.

**Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con):** There are many issues that we could raise in connection with the statement, and many of us did raise them on 25 October, when there was a Westminster Hall debate on the issue. At that time, I asked the Minister what the timeframe was for announcing his decision about the islands, and we were told that it would be announced before the end of the year. Does he accept how regrettable it is for many of us to have read the contents of the written ministerial statement in *The Guardian* on Tuesday night and how concerned we were, whether the written ministerial statement was published in this House or the other place, that it was published two hours before a long-standing meeting of the all-party parliamentary group to discuss the matter? Many of us feel that that was an affront to many Members. Will he undertake an investigation to determine how the statement ended up in a national newspaper, rather than here on the Floor of the House?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I understand what my hon. Friend is saying, although the Minister to whom he refers was not me. What I am doing today is repeating a statement that was made in another place. I hope and believe that the APPG was afforded proper respectful attention. I think that there were three Ministers there, properly explaining the policy. Quite how the matter got into *The Guardian* I do not know. All I can say is that that is not the natural paper for Her Majesty's Government, and I therefore suspect that the sources probably lie elsewhere.

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** *The Guardian* contacted me on Tuesday and asked me whether the Minister was going to make an announcement. Nobody in this House or in this country thinks that Britain behaved well in the 1960s in relation to the Chagos Islands. How we behaved then is a disgrace. The question is how we proceed now. Many people have suggested, incorrectly, that the Chagos marine preserve zone, which was initiated in 2010, was deliberately put in place to prevent the Chagossians returning to the British Indian Ocean Territory. That is completely untrue. Will the Minister update us on where we are now with protecting the biodiversity there, which is vital not only in itself, but to the entire east coast of Africa?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I acknowledge the keen attention that the hon. Gentleman gave to the matter when he was a Minister. He is right that the creation of a marine

protection area or zone has no bearing on what we are discussing today, but in respect of his subsequent question, I am pleased to say that I was in Washington last month at the ocean summit and, because we have a number of these islands as part of our historic legacy, I was able to announce a 4 million sq km marine protected area around many of them, which puts the UK in the forefront of marine biodiversity and protection.

**Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con):** Did any of the estimates for the cost of resettlement include the building of a prison such as we have had to build in Pitcairn?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I am not aware that they did, but my right hon. Friend and successor as Minister in the Department for International Development puts his finger on an example of a small community on a remote island that has had serious difficulties—demographic, behavioural and economic difficulties. Under our legislation we are obliged to offer reasonable support to such a population, even though on the Pitcairn Islands there are only 46 people. Simply for child safeguarding, when I was a Minister I insisted that all teenagers go to New Zealand to be educated, rather than suffer improper behaviour on the island.

**Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab):** I know the Minister quite well, and I detect a bit of embarrassment about his statement today, perhaps partly because of the way this whole thing has been handled, with a statement being rushed out yesterday, having been leaked to the papers. This is a very sad day for our country and it reflects so badly on our attitude to human rights across the world. Is there anything he would listen to that would make the Government change what I think is a deplorable decision?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I am afraid I have to say directly to the hon. Lady that I diametrically disagree with her. I am not in any way embarrassed, although, of course, when it comes to leaks, I neither like nor approve of them. However, this is the final decision. I do not think it is deplorable. Certainly in my direct experience, and looking at the evidence—and, indeed, in response to a consultation where so few people actually said, given what they thought the conditions would be in living there, that they wanted to go—it is not deplorable or a breach of human rights to say that, in our judgment, this would be creating a community that would actually not be sustainable and that, probably, at the end of the day, would be neither safe nor happy.

**James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con):** This is a sensitive decision, but it is the right decision. Is the Minister of State aware that, when I was Minister for overseas territories, I actually travelled out to the Chagos Islands and also went out to the outer islands? I think I am the only person in the House today who has visited. It was certainly quite a difficult experience; over five days, I spent only 15 minutes on land in a bed. This is a massive area, and it is very difficult to get to. It would be wholly impossible to populate the islands, as other Members of the House have argued. Does the Minister agree that, while this is a sensitive issue, it is good to have what I hope will be closure on it going forward?



**Sir Alan Duncan:** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, who has served, of course, as a Minister. As he says, he is probably the only one of us who has visited. I really think that what he has said is right: it is wise to realise that, despite the many arguments we have heard for repopulating the islands, that would not lead to an attractive existence for those who lived there, in what we foresee as the circumstances in which they would live. For instance, if someone has appendicitis and it takes them five days to get to a hospital, they are probably not going to get there alive. I hope the House will listen to my hon. Friend's first-hand evidence and experience.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What have the Government actually decided here? They say they will not facilitate resettlement, but do they accept or not that the Chagossians have a right of return or a right of abode? If I won the lottery and decided to spend my winnings on building a paradise retreat for myself on one of the Chagos Islands, would that kind of development be permitted?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** It would potentially be illegal. In my view, it is quite clear that our decision is that there should not be resettlement or repopulation on these islands.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): When we renegotiate this treaty with the Americans for the use of the Chagos Islands, could part of the conditions of agreement not be that Chagossians should be the people of choice for employment in the American airbase there? They would then be sustained by the American infrastructure and be looked after that way. That would be an honourable thing for us to do; what we decided to do yesterday is dishonourable.

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I do not agree with my hon.—and gallant—Friend. I do not think this is dishonourable. As I have already said, Diego Garcia is only one small part of this large archipelago. The nature of the employment there would not necessarily prove attractive, and it is not seen as practical to link subsistence payments for a repopulated series of islands to the use of the defence base, for which, at the moment, there is no payment anyway.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I assure the Minister that I understand better than most people in this House the challenges of providing public services in remote island communities? However, if the Chagos Islands are where people belong and that is where they want to be, they have an inalienable right to be there. What the Minister describes today as practicalities exist only because of what this country did some decades ago. Paying £40 million over 10 years cannot buy out our responsibilities.

**Sir Alan Duncan:** Notwithstanding the fact that, as I said earlier, the manner in which the Chagossians were displaced in the '60s and '70s was deplorable, we think it inappropriate to return them. We have to look to the future, not the past. Compensation has already been agreed and upheld in the courts, so we are now trying to offer a forward-looking support package of £40 million in the manner that I described.

**Charlie Elphicke** (Dover) (Con): If resettlement went forward as an option, how resilient would that be to climate change and changes in sea levels, which have been a problem elsewhere in the area? Will the Minister explain the background on the business of ceding the archipelago to Mauritius if it is no longer used for defence purposes?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** My hon. Friend answers his own questions in a way. Yes, the islands are low-lying and so do face some of the perils of climate change, although I hope that recent decisions and the actions of Governments will stop the water level rising any further. He is correct in saying that there is an understanding that we would cede the islands to the Mauritians in the event that they were no longer needed for defence purposes.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I believe this decision to be wrong. I also believe that the FCO has not comported itself well in how this information has come out. This morning I spoke to my constituent, Louis Elyse, who is the leader of the small Chagossian community in Wythenshawe and Sale East. He is utterly heartbroken and said that it was cruel and unusual that the KPMG report gave so much hope only for it to be undermined in such a way by Government yesterday.

**Sir Alan Duncan:** It is not entirely fair to say that the KPMG report was undermined by Government. The report gave a whole range of possible scenarios, and consultation then followed. I say again that only 25% of the 832 people who responded after further discussions indicated that they would want to return. These are very, very small numbers that would, under the KPMG report, trigger a very high cost per capita. I very much hope that the package we have announced will benefit those of the hon. Gentleman's constituents who qualify for assistance as Chagossians. It is on those people on his own doorstep that I would like to concentrate the expenditure of this money. We are very happy, in the FCO and DFID, to discuss how that might take place.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment to increase the number of visits to the Chagos Islands, and the package of measures for elderly people who were removed forcibly from the islands. Will he undertake to ensure that priority is given particularly to enabling elderly former residents of the islands to return to see the land of their birth, and their children and other parts of their family to see the beauty of the area?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** My hon. Friend puts his finger on a very important element of the support package that has been designed. It is a heritage package, in most respects, such that those who were born there and are still alive can go back and see the place of their birth, while those who are descendants can see the origin of their heritage. I very much hope that an appropriate amount of the £40 million will be directed to that end and will promptly facilitate exactly what he has described.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): A study by the coalition Government in 2014-15 concluded that resettlement was possible and affordable if Diego Garcia was involved. What consideration was given to that option? How have we moved from the resettlement that

[*Jim Shannon*]

the previous Government decided was a good idea to a statement today that says there will be no resettlement at all?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** The link with Diego Garcia as a potential payer, as it were, for all this is illusory, particularly because following consultation and the discussions that followed the KPMG report, it was clear that few, if any, Chagossians really wanted to work on the base.

**Dr Paul Monaghan** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): On the rights of Chagossians, the United Nations has found in their favour in regard to return, and recently the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has found against the UK Government and criticised their policy. Why is the Minister ignoring the view of the United Nations?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** We are not ignoring the view of the United Nations, and I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's interpretation. For all the reasons that I have described at length today, this would be an impractical proposal that would not lead to happy lives for those who might choose to go there.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The original decision is a throwback to colonial thinking, and the support package currently on offer does not even match the original discount given to Polaris nuclear missiles, so more money should be made available. More recently, the KPMG report says that it is feasible for Chagossians to return, and despite the Minister's comments on the quality of life that they would get, the consultation showed that more than 200 of them want to do so. How can the Government decide that they are not allowed to return because they would not get a good enough quality of life?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** Because of the expense and, indeed, because they would not get a good quality of life. Only 200 maximum said that they wished to do that, and it is not the case that the KPMG report said that it was straightforwardly feasible. It presented a number of

scenarios, most of which came out at a very high cost that could not justify the resettlement of Chagossians on the islands.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am sure that the Minister knows his history. A couple of hundred years ago, his predecessor would have stood in the same place and assured Parliament that the colony called America could not possibly deliver a decent standard of life to its people. Does not he accept that if the decision whether it is in the interests of islanders to return is made here and they are not given the right to decide, that is a return to the days of the arrogant, colonial, Britain-knows-best days, which should have been consigned to the dustbin of history 100 years ago?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** No, because, as I have already said, that right of self-determination is not considered legally to apply. We have gone through all the arguments today and explained why we think that would be impractical. It is better to look to the future and to make sure that the help that the islanders need, wherever they are, be it in Mauritius, the Seychelles or the United Kingdom, is properly given by Her Majesty's Government.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Last but certainly not least, I call Ian Paisley.

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): The Minister's statement about no right to self-determination will have much wider implications and will be listened to by many people on other islands and rocks around the world. Will he make it clear to those people who may have felt a shiver down their spine when they heard that statement that Her Majesty's Government do not intend to roll back self-determination anywhere else?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** My interpretation of the hon. Gentleman's question—I think that this will be to his satisfaction—is that he is implicitly also referring to sovereignty. May I make it absolutely clear that questions as to the existence or presence of a population on the British Indian Ocean Territory do not affect our position on sovereignty? We have no doubt whatsoever about our sovereignty of the British Indian Ocean Territory.

## Business of the House

11.8 am

**Valerie Vaz** (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington)**: The business for next week is as follows:

**MONDAY 21 NOVEMBER**—Remaining stages of the Higher Education and Research Bill.

**TUESDAY 22 NOVEMBER**—Opposition day (13th allotted day). There will be a debate on education and social mobility, followed by a debate on the national health service. Both debates will arise on an Opposition motion.

**WEDNESDAY 23 NOVEMBER**—The Chancellor of the Exchequer will present his autumn statement, followed by a general debate on exiting the EU and transport policy.

**THURSDAY 24 NOVEMBER**—Debate on a motion on reform of the support arrangements for people affected by contaminated blood and blood products, followed by a debate on a motion on reducing health inequality. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**FRIDAY 25 NOVEMBER**—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 28 November will include:

**MONDAY 28 NOVEMBER**—Remaining stages of the Digital Economy Bill.

**TUESDAY 29 NOVEMBER**—Second Reading of the Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill, after which the Chairman of Ways and Means is expected to announce opposed private business for consideration.

**WEDNESDAY 30 NOVEMBER**—Opposition day (14th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the Scottish National party. Subject to be announced.

**THURSDAY 1 DECEMBER**—Debate on a motion on transgender equality, followed by a general debate on the future of the UK fishing industry. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**FRIDAY 2 DECEMBER**—Private Members' Bills.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 21 and 28 November will be:

**MONDAY 21 NOVEMBER**—Debate on an e-petition relating to free childcare.

**MONDAY 28 NOVEMBER**—Debate on an e-petition relating to child cancer.

It may be for the convenience of the House if I also say that in view of the intense speculation in the media this morning about the Strathclyde report, my right hon. and noble Friend the Lord Privy Seal intends to make a statement in the House of Lords later today, and I shall place a copy of it in the Library of the House and in the Vote Office as soon as it is available. The Government intend to respond very soon to the Strathclyde report and to the Select Committee reports of both Houses on that subject. I can confirm that although the Government found Lord Strathclyde's analysis compelling and we are determined that the

principle of the supremacy of the elected House should be upheld, we have no plans, for now, to introduce new primary legislation.

**Valerie Vaz**: I thank the Leader of the House for the information he gave, particularly on the Strathclyde report. Obviously, we will wait to see what it says when he places a copy of it in the Library, but I understand that problems may remain despite the report's contents.

We have heard nothing from the Leader of the House about the dates for the next recess and the next terms. We appear to stop at 9 February—then there is radio silence; there is absolutely nothing after that. Is there any business? Are we on an election footing? Who knows? Even if the Government do not have plans, the staff and Members, and their families, all have to plan for Easter and summer. We might want to go to see Dippy the dinosaur, who is leaving the Natural History Museum and going on tour—there are rumours he might end up in 1,600 Pennsylvania Avenue in January 2017. The Prime Minister knows what it is like to talk to the winner of the votes of the electoral college—not the popular vote—in the US presidential election. She made the call and heard, as the rest of us do when we try to make an appointment with our doctor or we are talking to our banks, “Thank you for holding. You are ninth in the queue.”

In the Prime Minister's first foreign policy speech, at the Lord Mayor's banquet, she said that globalisation—and liberalism, a dirty word—

“in its current form has left too many people behind”.

What we say is that people have been left behind by the past six wasted years of this Government. They have been left behind by: austerity measures; freezes on wages; zero-hours contracts, which now extend to lecturers; current childcare provision; cuts in grants to local authorities, which have decimated local services and caused the closures of libraries; the bedroom tax, which has now been ruled in two cases to be unreasonable; and the reduction in Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs staff, which has stopped us addressing tax evasion and tax avoidance schemes, and therefore stopped money flowing into the Treasury coffers. Will the Leader of the House give us a debate in Government time to analyse how people have been affected by their policies in the past six years?

May we also have a debate on the sustainability and transformation plans in the NHS? We have had an Opposition debate, but we need a debate in Government time. The British Medical Association and the King's Fund have added their voices, saying that the plans are not transparent and there is no legal or clinical accountability. Clinicians, patients and the public should be involved, or we will all be left behind by the new NHS plans. I do not know whether you have heard, Mr Deputy Speaker, but they are called STP footprints—that reminds me of Dippy the dinosaur. STPs will form a group with clinical commissioning groups, local authorities and goodness knows how many other people, adding another tier of bureaucracy. We have had a reorganisation of the NHS, under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, and it cost £3 billion. Is this another one? Where are patient care and patient safety in this? These plans need to be made public immediately.



[Valerie Vaz]

May we have a debate on reaffirming the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law? A judge made an analysis of a case in a lecture to students, and the comments about that are extremely threatening. An hon. Member said:

“If judges dip their toes in political waters by making speeches outside the courtroom, they are asking to get splashed back.”

If anyone says something the Government do not like, they are trolled and trashed. Judges give speeches outside the courtroom all the time. Lord Denning and Lord Scarman did so in the Hamlyn lectures. Lord Bingham did so in the Sir David Williams lectures in Cambridge, and he produced a book called “The Rule of Law”. As I have done before in this House, I encourage all hon. Members to read that book. The situation is a far cry from the Youth Parliament last week, which wanted to debate a better, kinder democracy.

And now to Brexit. The Prime Minister yesterday said that our democracy is underpinned by the freedom of the press. However, No. 10 does not like the fact that the press have said that Whitehall is struggling to cope and that there is no plan for exiting the Union. Will the Leader of the House make a statement on whether there is a plan and whether extra civil servants are required for the 500 projects that relate to leaving the EU? The Leader of the House was the longest-serving Minister for Europe, and he has built very good relationships. He is best placed to be there to negotiate with friends rather than out of secrecy and fear. He must be despairing of the right hon. Members for North Somerset (Dr Fox), for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) and for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), who are like “Three Men in a Boat”, only without the oars. The sequel to that is “Three Men on the Bummel”. Bummel is a German word, so let me explain what it means. Jerome K. Jerome—who was, incidentally, born in Walsall—described it as a:

“journey, long or short, without an end; the only thing regulating it being the necessity of getting back within a given time to the point from which one started”.

That seems to describe the Government’s policy on exiting the Union. The British people are being left behind by this Government.

**Mr Lidington:** I join the hon. Lady in welcoming and celebrating the sitting of the UK Youth Parliament in this Chamber last Friday. She and I, and the Minister with responsibility for civil society, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Mr Wilson), were present. We all came away feeling energised by the enthusiasm of those hundreds of young men and women for open, vigorous debate and for the process and the institutions of parliamentary democracy. I hope that following their experience here they will go and spread the word in all parts of the country about how important it is for young people, whichever political party they sympathise with, to become involved in helping to shape the future of their country.

Apropos of recess dates, I am keen, too, to bring an end to the suspense as soon as possible, and I recognise that colleagues in all parts of the House wish to have clarity on future recess dates. Equally, the hon. Lady will appreciate that any Government have to bear in mind the pressures that there will be on handling

Government legislative business, but I hope to make an announcement as soon as possible. I can promise the hon. Lady that her appetite for additional legislation and other Government business will be more than satisfied in the months to come.

I was surprised that the hon. Lady made slightly disparaging comments about the Prime Minister’s efforts to build, from the start, a strong and robust relationship with the new President-elect of the United States of America. I had always thought it was common ground between the main political parties to accept that it is in the fundamental interests of the people of the UK for a British Government, whatever its political complexion, to seek to maintain a strong, intimate relationship with the US Administration, whether it is Democrat or Republican.

The hon. Lady asked about NHS plans. The STPs that she mentioned will all be made public. Indeed, the arrangements for STPs explicitly provide for local authority health oversight committees to challenge and check any proposal for significant service changes proposed by the NHS as a result of locally based reviews.

The hon. Lady asked me about EU exit. I am sorry if she was not listening during my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister’s response to the Leader of the Opposition yesterday, because my right hon. Friend spelled out the fact that the Government have a very clear plan. It is to secure for British business the maximum access to, and the greatest possible freedom to operate within, the single European market. It is to continue our strong tradition of close co-operation with our European colleagues on police and judicial matters, fighting together against terrorism and organised crime. It is to continue the essential network of relationships on which our foreign and security co-operation is founded. It is certainly to bring an end to the freedom of movement of people as it currently exists. It is also about forging a role for the United Kingdom as a champion of freedom of trade and investment worldwide. I would once have hoped that the Labour party aspired to support those objectives as well.

Equally, I was sorry that the hon. Lady painted such a bleak and inaccurate picture of the Government’s record in office without acknowledging this week’s employment figures. The figures show that more people are in work in the United Kingdom than ever before, and they show that more people with disabilities have secured employment than ever before. The Resolution Foundation has hailed the past 12 months as the best year in history for low-paid employees because of this Government’s introduction of the national living wage.

The hon. Lady said that she was looking forward to following the tour of Dippy the dinosaur around the country. It is somehow appropriate that Opposition Members should pay such attention to that event. It probably brings back fond memories of their recent leadership campaign. Perhaps the fact that the Opposition is mired in Jurassic-era policies helps to explain why so many of the hon. Lady’s Labour colleagues now fear political extinction.

**Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con):** Like the shadow Leader of the House, I believe in the freedom of the media to report, but the BBC increasingly appears to be becoming the “Brexit Bad Corporation”. I was listening to the “Today” programme at 8 am this morning, when



it reported on the launch today of four satellites as part of the European Space Agency and the EU's Galileo programme. At the end of the report, the BBC said that British businesses were fearful they would not be able to co-operate fully with the programme following Brexit. I did a bit of research and found out that China, Ukraine and Morocco are part of the programme, but the last time I looked, none of those three countries was in the European Union. Will the Leader of the House arrange for the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to come to the House to tell us what discussions she is having with Lord Tony Hall about having some fairness in the coverage of our Brexit?

**Mr Lidington:** My hon. Friend is right to say that there is active participation by a number of non-member states in the Galileo and various other EU programmes. That indicates that it is possible for a country outside the EU, but enjoying friendly relationships with it, to forge such a partnership. It is probably fair to say that the BBC got a lot of flak from both camps during the referendum campaign. The best position for Ministers to take is to respect the independence of the BBC. We should make complaints if we feel that the Government's position is misrepresented in some way, but, in a free society, we ultimately have to respect the editorial judgment of the broadcasters and newspaper editors.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week.

Well, well—it looks like the unelected circus down the corridor has just won the battle of the statutory instrument, as the Government hastily and embarrassingly withdraw all their plans to rein in the powers of the unelected ones. With the imminent ennoblement of the dark lord Farage it seems as though the only intention the Government have for the House of Lords is to increase the numbers in that grotesque place down the corridor.

Today's piece of Tory Brexit cluelessness does not come from the prosecco-swilling Foreign Secretary as he goes around Europe upsetting the diplomatic community but from the Treasury, as we learn that £100 billion is to be sucked out of the economy because of this shambolic Brexit. Given that dramatic news I presume we are not going to be getting our £350 million for the NHS. May I suggest a way in which we might be able to resolve that situation—could we perhaps get some of the Brexiteer clowns who made that absurd statement during the referendum to come forward and apologise for what they said during the campaign?

We are now anticipating that the Government will be defeated in the Supreme Court when it comes to the appeal on the High Court ruling. Will the Leader of the House tell us what provisional plans he has for legislation as it comes forward? As Leader of the House—this House—will he pledge that there will be opportunities for Members to properly debate that legislation and for amendments to be tabled, and there will be no attempts whatever to curtail any debate on it?

Lastly, after business questions the Labour shadow Leader of the House and I will be doing some recording for the Jo Cox Foundation, as we reclaim the song "You Can't Always Get What You Want". It is for a great

cause, and I am sure that the Leader of the House will be prepared to support it; perhaps he will even help us get to No. 1 in the new year.

**Mr Lidington:** The hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to put questions to the Chancellor of the Exchequer after the autumn statement about the implications for the economy of EU exit and many other matters.

The Government believe that we have a powerful case to argue in the forthcoming Supreme Court case. We intend to make that case. We should not forget that the High Court in Northern Ireland came to a different conclusion from the High Court in England on the matter. Both the Belfast and the London cases are to be heard together by the Supreme Court later this year. The Government are of course completely respectful of the role of the courts and their independence, and of the rule of law. That is written into the ministerial code and the civil service code alike.

I am certainly happy to wish the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues well in their chart-topping endeavour. Given the character of some of the songs that have managed to top the charts at Christmas and the new year over recent decades, he could follow in the footsteps of Clive Dunn and children's choirs in becoming an emblem of this country's somewhat eclectic tastes in music.

**Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I read with interest today in the *Telegraph* an article by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about the conference she has been to in Vietnam. May we ask her to give an urgent statement next week to explain why she is saying that we are leading the world in banning ivory but the fact is that we are only consulting on it after Christmas?

**Mr Lidington:** There will be questions to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on 24 November, which will give my hon. Friend the opportunity she seeks. I think hon. Members on both sides of the House will want to support strongly the lead my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is taking in trying not just to highlight this issue in terms of British public opinion, but in persuading other Governments, in particular those from which the demand for ivory and other products from endangered species largely comes, that it is in their interests and in the interests of the people of the world to maintain wildlife, habitats and the biodiversity of the planet.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the welcome development of giving the Backbench Business Committee notice of available dates. That has allowed him to announce this morning the next two Thursdays' Backbench Business debates. Long may that continue.

I was not able to get in on Transport questions this morning, but the delay to the electrification of the Great Western main line is having a knock-on impact. That electrification was going to release class 150 and class 153 diesel trains for use on the northern rail franchise. There is a massive differential in investment in rail between the north and the south, but I am afraid

[*Ian Mearns*]

to say that even delays to the investment proposals in the south and the south-west are having a knock-on effect on rail in the northern “poorhouse”.

**Mr Lidington:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments about my efforts to try to give greater notice to him and his Committee about forthcoming Backbench Business days. I am committed to trying to maintain that good practice.

The Government are committed to pursuing the electrification of the Great Western main line. As the recent announcement reflected, however, we need to ensure that constant attention is paid to the need for best value for the taxpayer in how we go about that. I will draw his concerns about the possible impact on the northern rail franchise to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport.

**Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the system of testing at key stage 1 and key stage 2? Concern has been expressed about whether teachers are being adequately trained in the new rules. There also seems to be some inconsistency in the implementation and moderation of the testing, with particular regard to reading at key stage 2 and the disadvantageous effect it may have on children with special educational needs.

**Mr Lidington:** I ought to declare an interest, as my wife is a primary school teacher who teaches key stage 1 and key stage 2. A wide-ranging consultation, which will commence in the new year, was announced on 19 October by the Secretary of State for Education. It will give teachers, headteachers and others the opportunity to have their say on the current arrangements for primary assessment. The objective surely has to be to have a system in place that seeks always to drive up the standards attained by children in primary school, while of course at the same time making sure that children with disabilities and special educational needs have their particular needs taken into account, and that they are themselves able to succeed to the very limit of their own talents and determination.

**Jim Fitzpatrick** (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Fourteen-year-old Nasar Ahmed, who lived in my constituency, died on Monday this week after falling ill at school last Thursday. His family are, naturally, devastated. His death is being investigated by the police as unexplained; by the local authority, which has a duty of care; and possibly by the Health and Safety Executive. I have every confidence that the authorities will conduct a thorough examination, but in the event of wider implications and lessons to be learned my request of the Leader of the House is that I can rely on his support for access to appropriate Ministers outside this Chamber—and, with your approval, Mr Deputy Speaker, inside this Chamber—should that prove necessary in due course.

**Mr Lidington:** First, may I express my sorrow and deep sympathy for the family of Nasar Ahmed? What has happened to them is the most appalling and unspeakable tragedy that any parent or relative can imagine. Clearly, as there are ongoing investigations, the hon. Gentleman would not expect me to comment further in detail, but I

can assure him that the Government will want to pay close attention to the findings, and I am confident that should central Government need to reflect on current law and practice the relevant Ministers will be happy to talk to him.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Last weekend, we commemorated those who sacrificed their lives in service to this country to enable us to live in freedom and democracy. This weekend, we will celebrate the role of the Indian army in the great war and world war two, and on Sunday the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women will march at the Cenotaph, and I will be pleased and honoured to join them. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate in Government time, particularly in the centenary of the great war, to commemorate the role of the various parts of what was then the empire, and is now the Commonwealth, in securing our freedom?

**Mr Lidington:** I cannot promise my hon. Friend a debate in Government time—this might well be a suitable subject for an Adjournment debate either here or in Westminster Hall—but I think that the House will be at one in joining him in saluting the sacrifice and service of those who served in the Indian army during both world wars and in saluting Jewish servicemen and women who also fought for freedom.

**Ms Margaret Ritchie** (South Down) (SDLP): Will the Leader of the House facilitate a statement from the Home Secretary regarding the position of non-EEA fishermen, mainly Filipinos, who are critical to the fishing industry in the County Down ports and the ports of the west of Scotland and who have already been subjected to raids by UK border agencies? We urgently need proper regulation in this area. We have already had meetings with the Immigration Minister, but we now urgently need a statement from the Home Secretary outlining a solution.

**Mr Lidington:** Having visited Kilkeel a few years ago, I am aware of the importance of the fishing industry in the hon. Lady's constituency, and I will certainly draw to the Home Secretary's attention the points she has made. It is clearly important that we have arrangements to ensure that people from other countries who come and work here are legally entitled to be here, not least because legal status enables them to take advantage of the opportunities to work and, to some extent, access services they might need. Without legal status, they can so easily be exploited by rogue employers. I accept, however, that the fishing industry has for some time needed to take on labour from the Philippines and other countries, and I will make sure that Home Office Ministers are aware of this problem.

**Graham Evans** (Weaver Vale) (Con): The House of Commons briefing paper on the northern powerhouse, issued on 1 November, states that the ability of the north-west to retain talented graduates was identified as a key factor in the success of the northern powerhouse. May we have a debate on how the Government, in partnership with north-west universities and business, will work to better retain skills developed in the north-west?

**Mr Lidington:** My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. When we look at how to encourage a revival of the civic dynamism that characterised the growth of the great northern cities during the 19th and early 20th centuries, we need to think about economic stimuli and about how we can further encourage those cities as centres of educational and research excellence and as centres of culture and the arts. That is why the devolutionary model initiated by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) and being taken forward by the present Government is so attractive. It enables elected authorities in the region itself to work across the piece on policies that address the cultural and educational issues, alongside those simply to do with economics.

**Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP):** Will the Leader of the House assure us that next week's debate on Europe will be broad enough to encompass today's opinion poll finding that 90% of the country wants to be within the single marketplace? Given that I want to be in the single marketplace, that I know the Leader of the House wants to be in the single marketplace and that anybody with an ounce of a sense understands that in this Trumpian world of protectionist economics where the special relationship means being 11th in the telephone queue for a call with the new American President, we had better be in the single marketplace, will the Leader of the House now get up to the Dispatch Box and tell us that he actually understands the difference between access to a marketplace, which the association of Patagonian shoe manufacturers has, and being within the single marketplace, which should be the overwhelming priority of the Government to secure?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Business questions are about understanding—that is the only slight difference.

**Mr Lidington:** I remind the right hon. Gentleman that, as the Prime Minister repeated yesterday, her declared objective is not just the maximum access for British companies to the European market, but the greatest possible freedom to operate within that market as well. Clearly, the detail of that future trading and investment relationship is going to be an absolutely core element of the negotiations that we intend to start next year. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will be ingenious and experienced enough to find ways of weaving his particular concern into next week's debate or indeed on other occasions.

**Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con):** My right hon. Friend may not be aware that Walsall Council is proposing to close all the libraries within the borough, save for one in the town centre. There are six libraries in my constituency and they are all under consideration for closure. What advice can my right hon. Friend give me about this, and will he consider allowing time for a debate on libraries and on the fact that libraries are about much more than just books?

**Mr Lidington:** My hon. Friend is right to challenge some of the decisions that Walsall Council is proposing to take about libraries. Of course local authorities throughout England have a statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service, and the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has a

statutory duty to superintend that local provision. She also has the power to call a local inquiry if she believes that there is evidence to doubt that the local authority is providing the required service. I am sure that my hon. Friend will ensure that, if such a service is not being provided by Walsall Council, she will put a strong case to the Secretary of State.

**Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab):** Following the publication of the Cheshire and Merseyside NHS sustainability and transformation plan on Wednesday, a senior manager from Liverpool clinical commissioning group has admitted in the *Liverpool Echo* that the plans are financially driven, were drawn up in secrecy and are already being implemented—yet none of my constituents has had any say in how the proposals were formulated. May we have a debate in Government time so that we can properly consider the impact on my Garston and Halewood constituents of the proposals to reduce the opening hours at Whiston A&E and supposedly “reconfigure” the Liverpool women's hospital while merging the Royal, Aintree and Broadgreen Trusts?

**Mr Lidington:** As the sustainability and transformation plans are published, it is important that they are examined closely. As I said earlier, local authorities have the power in law to exercise scrutiny and a check on proposals for changes in service delivery. The Government have delivered to the NHS all the money that the NHS chief executive asked for to fund reforms to the NHS to make it suitable for the health policy challenges of today and the future. When any of us talk to clinicians in our constituencies, we often find that it is the doctors and the nurses who say that there sometimes needs to be a change to the pattern of the location of services, particularly to deliver more specialist units, to provide patients with better treatment.

**Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con):** With today's news that Boeing is planning to open a new aviation maintenance facility at Gatwick airport, supporting over 100 jobs, may we have a debate on the importance of the British aviation industry—particularly post-Brexit, given that we are an island trading nation—hopefully including the issue of reducing air passenger duty?

**Mr Lidington:** I shall take my hon. Friend's last comment as a late bid to the Chancellor of the Exchequer prior to the autumn statement, but he has made a good point about the importance of the aviation industry to the country's economic health and job creation. I think that Boeing's investment at Gatwick is a further sign that, despite the political turbulence that is bound to follow the referendum result, our country is still seen as an extremely attractive destination for global investors.

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** This building is one of the most iconic in the world, and millions of people take photographs of it every day, but it has problems. Last week the House of Lords had to go into Pleasure—its word, not mine—because of the noise of the building work that was going on. It is now 10 weeks since the Joint Committee, two of whose members were Ministers, produced its report on what should happen here, and all the evidence suggests that any delay of this nature costs millions of pounds more. Why can we not have a debate as soon as possible, and certainly before Christmas?



**Mr Lidington:** Both the Leader of the House of Lords and I want Parliament to have an opportunity to debate this matter and make a decision as soon as possible. As a responsible Government, we have felt the need to seek the advice of the independent Major Projects Authority about the Government's proposals in particular, but I hope that we shall be able to announce a date before much longer.

**Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): Voting in my shop competition closes in a couple of weeks' time, on 1 December, and I shall be announcing the results on Small Business Saturday. I urge those who have not yet voted for their favourite shops to do so before voting closes. May we have a debate about the role that our high streets play in creating new jobs and ensuring that we have thriving local communities?

**Mr Lidington:** My hon. Friend is right to speak up for importance of high streets as a focus of both civic identity and economic activity in towns and villages throughout the country. I applaud the initiative that she has taken, and I hope that not only many Members of Parliament but many members of the public will play an active part in the poll she has launched.

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): May I press the Leader of the House a little further on his response to the earlier question about the Joint Committee's report on restoration and renewal? Does he intend the motion and debate proposed in the report to be dealt with in the House before Christmas?

**Mr Lidington:** I am not yet in a position to announce a firm date. I am, however, as aware as anyone else of the intense pressures on services in the building that need to be completely renewed, and of the links between the R and R project and the timetable for other restoration work that needs to be done.

**Chris White** (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): As we approach the winter months, it is essential to ensure that people have access to the best possible tariffs for their energy. May we have a debate about competition in the UK energy market?

**Mr Lidington:** That is an important point, especially as winter is now approaching. We have a more competitive domestic retail energy market than ever before, and nearly 4 million energy accounts were switched between January and June this year, but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy wants to do more. He is particularly anxious to ensure that customers are not penalised for loyalty, and that energy companies treat all their customers fairly, not just those who switch between suppliers.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I remind the Leader of the House that our constituents will be deeply affected by the decision to take action on article 50, which will, it seems, be made in March? It will make a dramatic change to their lives—indeed, to all our lives. Is it not about time the Leader of the House told us that we shall have a major opportunity every week to debate our progress towards that date? This is such a big issue that my constituents demand

accountability of that kind from the House. Will the Secretary of State introduce special measures to meet their needs?

**Mr Lidington:** I have just announced the second in a series of debates in Government time about aspects of the public's decision in the referendum that this country should leave the European Union, so the Government are committed to providing the opportunities the hon. Gentleman seeks. He will also have the opportunity to put questions to the Foreign Secretary on 22 November, and to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union on 1 December.

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend assist in securing a debate on the preservation of ancient woodland and veteran trees? People are writing to me, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Winchester (Steve Brine) and for Meon Valley (George Hollingbery), about the possible bulldozing of ancient woodland and its loss to our communities and the environment. This needs further protection where there are no neighbourhood or local plans, but options B and C in our proposed local plan are putting my constituents and their green spaces in peril.

**Mr Lidington:** My hon. Friend's point will strike a chord with many Members on both sides of the House. She may get an opportunity to raise that matter on Monday 28 November during Communities and Local Government questions, but I should add that the sooner local authorities get their local plans in place, the sooner they will be able to assure local people that there will be proper protection for ancient woodlands and for other key environmental amenities.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Yesterday the Exiting the European Union Committee heard evidence from Dr Hannah White, director of research at the Institute for Government. It has warned that there will be a full-blown constitutional crisis unless all nations of the UK are involved in the negotiations around leaving the EU. Under questioning, Dr White said it would be almost unprecedented for one of the devolved legislatures to express concern and refuse to pass a legislative consent motion but for the UK Government to go ahead none the less. May we have a debate about how we can avert the constitutional crisis that the Institute of Government has warned about by involving all the devolved nations fully in negotiations to leave the EU?

**Mr Lidington:** The Government have made it clear again and again that we are committed to engaging in detail and constantly with all three devolved Administrations, whether that is at the level of the Joint Ministerial Committee, or at operational level between Ministers here and Ministers in the devolved Administrations or between officials in the different Administrations.

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): May we have a debate on responsibility for repairing damaged culverts? They result in flooding in certain parts of my constituency every time there is heavy rain, and there is a problem with determining who is responsible for the damage,



who is responsible for repairs, and what can be done if nobody accepts responsibility, or if they do but cannot afford to pay for the damage.

**Mr Lidington:** I will draw my hon. Friend's concern to the attention of the relevant Minister at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but I can say to him that under the Flood and Water Management Act 2010, unitary authorities and county councils have a duty to be the lead local flood authority. That Act also requires all authorities to co-operate and exchange information.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): Is the Leader of the House excited by today's news of a unique parliamentary series of events next year with the performance of a brand-new musical under the snappy title of "The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee takes oral evidence on the relationship between Whitehall and Kids Company"? Does he not think that arrangements by him to have a performance in this House would be both politically instructive and culturally enriching?

**Mr Lidington:** I can barely contain my excitement. I look forward to the Chairman of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), who has a fine baritone voice, playing himself in such a performance.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. Let's hear from a man who should be able to deliver well: Conor McGinn.

**Conor McGinn** (St Helens North) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. My Bill to introduce Helen's law would deny parole to murderers who refuse to reveal the location of their victims' remains. It has the support of 400,000 members of the public and many Members on both sides of the House, but will only become law if the Government support it or incorporate it into their legislative programme. Will the right hon. Gentleman and perhaps the Justice Secretary meet me and Helen's mum, Marie McCourt, to discuss how we might work together on this?

**Mr Lidington:** I will ask the relevant Minister in the Justice Department to make contact with the hon. Gentleman about this case. No one in the House today will have anything but unreserved sympathy for the family involved, or indeed for any other family in the same appalling situation. There will be also opportunities for him to highlight this issue further through Adjournment debates.

**Greg Mulholland** (Leeds North West) (LD): It has now emerged that the person appointed to the quasi-judicial role of Pubs Code Adjudicator has made personal loans of more than £230,000 to Fleurets, a company that is dependent on income from the pub companies that he is supposed to regulate. Having taken four months to respond to the Select Committee, which said that the adjudicator's appointment should be rescinded, the Secretary of State has now said that he is not going to look into the matter. That is not good enough. May we have an oral statement at the Dispatch Box from the Secretary of State?

**Mr Lidington:** I am not familiar with every detail of this case, but my understanding is that the regulator in question was appointed following the normal public appointments process involving all the Nolan principles. I also understand that the criticisms that the hon. Gentleman and others have made have been carefully considered and that there was no evidence to justify a change to the original decision.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On 15 September, the rail Minister, the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), told me that I could expect "good news" about rail electrification to Hull shortly. Yesterday afternoon that scheme was scrapped, despite it appearing in the Government's northern transport plan. May we please have a debate in Government time about whether people in Hull, who pay their taxes and often pay higher rail fares, can believe anything that a Tory Minister says to them about being included in the northern powerhouse?

**Mr Lidington:** As the hon. Lady knows, the Government are investing large sums of taxpayers' money in improvements to transport infrastructure and, more generally, in northern cities, but I will alert the rail Minister to her particular concern about the situation relating to Hull.

**Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): The city of Dundee has spent years and hundreds of thousands of pounds preparing a bid to become the 2023 European city of culture, which would bring funding from Brussels, as well as being a major boost for tourism and cultural, social and economic development. This has now been thrown into doubt, bizarrely by the UK Government's Culture Secretary, who wants to withdraw from the competition. This has led to the Foreign Secretary having to write to suggest that this move would be framed as "pulling up the drawbridge". The Culture Secretary should check her job title—the clue is in the name. May we have an urgent debate on this matter before yet more Brexit folly leads to a devastating blow for Dundee?

**Mr Lidington:** Cities of culture will be one aspect of the forthcoming negotiations between the United Kingdom Government and the EU 27. This is tied up with our EU membership and our eligibility to draw upon EU funds.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): Four months have passed since the end of the Government's consultation on tips, gratuities and service charges, but abuses are still happening, with workers being told that they will receive a share of the service charge only if their pay is cut by a third. The former Leader of the House promised some months ago that the Business Secretary would update the House about this, but there has been a deafening silence. Will the Government now provide time as soon as possible for the new Business Secretary to make a statement on this matter?

**Mr Lidington:** If that commitment was given in the past, I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is made aware of the hon. Lady's wish for such an announcement as soon as possible.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Twice visitors from the diocese of Hyderabad have been refused visas to visit the Church of Scotland Presbytery of Glasgow, despite the Church having committed to bear the costs. The reason for the refusal suggested that the visitors were not genuine, despite the existence of an ongoing twinning relationship. I hear similar spurious reasons for visa refusals week in, week out. May we please have a statement in Government time on how the Government plan to sort out this sorry situation?

**Mr Lidington:** I know from my constituency experience that decisions by immigration officers about individual visa applications are often difficult and sensitive. My advice to constituents is always to ensure that the paperwork—the audit trail—is wholly in place so that it is absolutely clear that people are going to abide by the terms of the visa, if granted, and that they will return to their own country at the end of the visa term. The hon. Lady will clearly not expect me to know about that particular case, but if she writes to me, I will pass the details to the Immigration Minister.

**Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Yesterday, the National Assembly for Wales unanimously supported a motion led by my colleague Steffan Lewis calling for an urgent review of the mineworkers pension scheme. Over the years, the Treasury has cashed in around £8 billion of surpluses from the scheme for acting as a guarantor. May we have a Treasury statement on the matter so that MPs who represent mining communities can make the case for a review?

**Mr Lidington:** Treasury questions on 29 November may well provide the hon. Gentleman with that opportunity.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Can I check with the Leader of the House whether the Government will publish Sir John Parker's national shipbuilding strategy prior to the autumn statement? If so, may we have a debate in Government time to discuss this iconic, highly skilled industry, which employs many of my constituents and other workers in the United Kingdom?

**Mr Lidington:** I will ensure that the shipping Minister knows about the hon. Gentleman's wish for the strategy to be published as soon as possible. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will welcome the Ministry of Defence's commitment to spend more money on building new ships in Scottish shipyards, which will maintain the jobs and expertise that he rightly celebrates.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I recently spoke to the CEO of Pernod Ricard, who informed me that the Chivas Brothers site in Paisley will close in three years. I learned yesterday that while the workforce consultation is in its infancy, the company has applied for permission to demolish part of the site. May we have a debate on employment rights to ensure that such applications can take place only after a consultation has concluded?

**Mr Lidington:** As the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge, this is a clearly a commercial decision for the company concerned, but the company must, of course, act in

accordance with UK and European employment law as it goes about such things. An Adjournment debate might give the hon. Gentleman the opportunity to highlight this important local issue.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My youngest son is doing an accountancy course. He explained to me that if I want to spend 2% of my budget on one thing and 0.7% on another, I need to set aside 2.7% of my budget. Will the Leader of the House therefore explain how the Government can claim to spend 2% of GDP on defence and 0.7% on overseas aid when those two sums do not add up to 2.7%?

**Mr Lidington:** The 0.7% target refers to official development assistance expenditure, as defined by the OECD. The 2% is a NATO target, which relies on a completely different set of criteria. The hon. Gentleman is asking me to compare apples with pears.

**Mr Mark Williams** (Ceredigion) (LD): In February, Department for Culture, Media and Sport Ministers froze rather than cut their contribution to S4C's budget pending the outcome of a review into the broadcaster's future. We still have no review. Will the Leader of the House allow us a debate on a sustainable future and funding for S4C?

**Mr Lidington:** I completely understand why Welsh-language broadcasting is important to the hon. Gentleman's constituents. I note that Welsh questions are on 30 November, which might provide him the opportunity to raise that matter.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Pakistan's poverty rate is some 39%. It has weak governance and political institutions. It has been gripped by violent extremism—it is No. 22 in the league table—and its levels of persecution of Christians and other ethnic minorities put it at the top of the league table for that. It is affected by climate change and natural disasters, which have exacerbated migration and food insecurity. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on the important issue of the shrinking space for civil society in Pakistan?

**Mr Lidington:** The hon. Gentleman is a formidable champion of religious rights in parts of the world where those rights are under threat. I think everyone here would want to join him in arguing passionately for freedom of worship and religious expression everywhere. Foreign Office questions are coming up on 22 November, at which he might wish to raise this subject. We do need to continue to help the fragile authorities in Pakistan, but we try to target our aid through non-governmental organisations and others to ensure that it reaches those who are in such desperate need.

**Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Following inquiries from constituents who are serving prison officers, I tabled written parliamentary questions 46654 and 46655 on 15 September regarding officers' life expectancy, and their medical and injury awards. To date, I have had no answer, and not even a holding response to what were named day questions submitted more than two months ago. That is unacceptable. May we therefore have a debate in Government time on the response times to parliamentary questions?

**Mr Lidington:** The Government not only set expected standards for replies to parliamentary questions, but publish regular bulletins showing how each Department has performed against those standards. I am concerned by what the hon. Gentleman says and I shall make sure that it is chased up today with the Department concerned.

**Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP):** Earlier, the Leader of the House waxed positive about the Government's commitments to city deals and regional growth deals. May we have a debate in this House on the range and reach of such deals across the UK, including the very positive developments and prospects in Scotland and Wales? That might help to illuminate the resistance and negligence on the part of the Northern Ireland Executive in failing to take up what previous Whitehall Ministers have said would be their readiness to support deals—if they get proposals—including cross-border deals.

**Mr Lidington:** It may well be that either a long debate in Westminster Hall or a Backbench Business Committee debate would provide the opportunity for the kind of exchange of best practice that the hon. Gentleman wants, so that Members from different parts of the UK can all share their relevant experiences. Clearly the Northern Ireland Act 1998 devolves important powers to the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly, and it must be for the authorities in Northern Ireland primarily to decide how to take this policy further.

**Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP):** The business statement gives us no indication of when the Brexit Secretary will come to the Dispatch Box, as required by a resolution of this House, to explain why he signed up to the comprehensive economic and trade agreement without waiting for it to clear parliamentary scrutiny, and nor does it give us any indication as to when an urgent

debate in Government time, which is also required, will be held. I raised this matter in business questions on 20 October. During the intervening four weeks, will the Leader of the House tell us what he has done to get those two items of urgent business on to the Order Paper?

**Mr Lidington:** The position is that CETA has to be ratified by all 28 member states of the European Union. Under our system, that means that the treaty—for that is what this is—must be laid before Parliament under the terms of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 and that can, if Members so wish, provide the trigger for a debate.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP):** How many more times do the Government expect to end up in court? Not only have they been taken to court over the article 50 shambles, but they lost their appeal against the Terence Higgins Trust and are now compelled to provide PrEP—pre-exposure prophylaxis—anti-HIV drugs to those who badly need them. Given that, can we have a debate in Government time on the commissioning of this treatment, which will make a massive difference to rolling back the tide on the spread of HIV across the United Kingdom?

**Mr Lidington:** We welcome the clarity that the recent court judgment on PrEP provided. As the hon. Gentleman knows, there was a genuine difference between the view of the NHS and the view of local authorities as to where legal responsibility ought to rest, and we now have that clarity. Over the years, Governments of every political shade have got used to being taken to court by way of judicial review or other challenge. That is what living in a free society under the rule of law is about.



## Backbench Business

### Employment and Support Allowance and Universal Credit

**Mr Speaker:** To move the motion, in a contribution that should not exceed 15 minutes in total—I make this point by way of reminder, as there has been slippage in recent times—I call Mr Neil Gray.

12.9 pm

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House notes the Government's plans to reduce the Employment and Support Allowance work-related activity component and the corresponding limited capability for work component in universal credit in April 2017; further notes that this measure will cut the weekly amount received by recipients with long-term health conditions or disabilities by £30 and that these cuts are due to take place before the promised Work and Health programme Green Paper can be considered or implemented; and therefore calls on the Government to use the upcoming Autumn Statement to postpone the cuts to Employment and Support Allowance work-related activity component and the corresponding limited capability for work component in universal credit until appropriate alternative measures to progress the commitment to halve the disability employment gap have been considered, in order to secure support for current and future claimants so that sick and disabled people are supported adequately when they are unable to work.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for accepting my application for this urgent debate today. It was brought to the Committee at short notice and with my added time pressures ahead of the autumn statement, so I am grateful to the Committee. I am grateful also to the MPs from nine parties in this Parliament who supported the motion.

From April 2017, new employment support allowance claimants who are placed in the work-related activity group will receive £29.05 less than do current ESA WRAG claimants. The Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 legislated for this cut, and the Government promised

“new funding for additional support to help claimants return to work.”—[*Official Report*, 8 July 2015; Vol. 598, c. 333.]

This afternoon, I intend to set out why the Government should use the opportunity of the autumn statement, a new Prime Minister, a new Chancellor and a new set of Department for Work and Pensions Ministers to pause the cuts to ESA WRAG and the corresponding universal credit work allowance elements, at least until the new system that they are to propose has been scrutinised and implemented.

**Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): I agree with the motion. Does the hon. Gentleman recall, as I do, that the Conservative party manifesto said that the target for increasing employment support for disabled people was to halve the disability employment by 2020, and does he share my dismay that that target has been abandoned?

**Neil Gray:** I sincerely hope that it has not been abandoned and that the Government will continue to work towards it. I will come to that later in my speech.

It is clear to me that it is not Opposition politicians but Government Back Benchers who are most influential in changing the minds of Ministers, especially when those Ministers currently have such a narrow majority,

so I am pleased to have the support of at least five Conservative Members for this motion. In their actions in supporting this debate, they are indeed honourable, for it is not an easy thing to go against the current thinking of their party. I am aware that a number of other Conservative Members are expressing their concerns in private, and some have made more public statements of concern, such as the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) and the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith). I am not standing here today to lambast the Government. I am here to make a cross-party appeal to the Government: please press pause on these cuts.

Today is about this new set of Government Ministers having an opportunity to look at this issue again—to look at the timetable of events that have led us to this point and to look ahead to the impact that these cuts will have on nearly half a million sick and disabled people who have been found unfit for work. Yesterday, I attended an event in Westminster with Disability Agenda Scotland, which is an organisation of six disability charities north of the border. One of the speakers at the event really highlighted for me, and should highlight for us all, why this issue is so important.

John Clarke from Stirling spoke about his experience of trying to enter the employment market. He volunteered for 10 years in a charity shop. He took on all the responsibilities that an employee would be expected to take on. He did cash handling, was customer facing and turned up for his shifts in a timeous fashion at all times. He has been making a very meaningful attempt to find work. John has been trying to find paid employment, using the significant experience that he gained from his time at the shop to progress that, but has failed to do so.

John just happens to have a learning disability and is in receipt of ESA WRAG. He is not financially incentivised to be out of work because he is on ESA WRAG; he is desperate to get a job. He needs his ESA WRAG, because he has additional costs associated with finding work, but John also needs the Government to come forward with that additional package that the Prime Minister talked about yesterday—such as supporting employers, publicising Access to Work more widely and helping employers see that someone like him would be an asset, not a liability, to their workplace.

What is most concerning for me about John's story is that he has a new volunteering role after moving on from the charity shop, but the jobcentre wants him to stop that so he can come in to carry out job searches. I put it to those on the Treasury Bench today—what is more beneficial to John, not just for his ability to get a job, but for his emotional wellbeing, his self-worth and his feeling of contributing to society?

This is where we come to the crux of the issue, and John summed it up so well. He said, “Everyone has needs and it is important that these needs are met.” That is the starting point from which the UK Government should be working. We cannot escape the fact that part of that need is financial. It is worth remembering that the rationale for paying some claimants more than others was considered by Richard Berthoud in his 1998 report on disability benefits. He found that the primary reason historically was that those who have to live for a

long time on social security could not be expected to survive on the very low income available as a temporary measure for a short-term claimant.

Some people may argue that those who currently receive ESA WRAG, like John, will not be affected by the cut, but as people fall in and out of work, with many of those who receive ESA WRAG the subject of fluctuating conditions, they could well be affected. So if John gets a job after April next year, which I hope will happen sooner for him, and if, unfortunately, it does not work out, although obviously I hope it does, John will reapply for ESA, but will receive £30 per week less than he does now. That is a reduction in income of almost a third between what John receives now and what he would receive next year.

This cut will create two tiers of disability support and create an arbitrary cut-off for people to receive a reduced support rate, purely by virtue of their application date. The Scottish Association for Mental Health agrees. It says that this cut could provide a perverse disincentive to work for people with mental health conditions, who make up 49% of ESA WRAG recipients. It says that people who are currently in receipt of ESA may be affected by the forthcoming change in April 2017 if they have been claiming the benefit and move into work before they are well enough to do so.

Why should John's peers who apply for ESA WRAG next year get two thirds of the support that John gets now and could continue to receive if, sadly, he does not find a job? John just wants a job. He is not incentivised to be out of work because of ESA WRAG payments. Such a suggestion is an insult to John and to the hundreds of thousands of sick or disabled people like him who want to work but struggle to get noticed in the employment market. The Government will add to that frustration and the feeling of rejection by telling them that the £30 a week lifeline is being pulled away because it somehow holds them back.

The payment of a higher rate of ESA WRAG compared to jobseeker's allowance was supposed to acknowledge the longer time that someone in that position will take to find employment. It was also supposed to acknowledge the additional costs that someone with a long-term illness or disability incurs as they carry out work-related activity. Scope is particularly concerned at this aspect and says that this cut to disability support will have an impact on the financial wellbeing of sick and disabled people, leaving them further from work, not closer. Its research suggests that 49% of disabled people rely on credit cards or loans to pay for everyday items such as food and clothing.

New figures today from the StepChange Debt Charity show that a third of ESA recipients were running a budget deficit, and that figure could rise to over a half if they had a cut to their income, however small that cut. John's experience shows us that it is not easy to tell ESA WRAG recipients to find work to make up for that cut. He has done everything he can to do that.

This leads me on to the timing issue before us. During the debates on the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, the Government at the time said that they would find new funding for additional support to help claimants return to work—new money and a new system, which was included in then the work and health programme White Paper, now the Green Paper. I argued then and I repeat now, that the Government cannot cut away this lifeline

support before the new system of support is in place, otherwise there will be a vacuum of support from April. ESA WRAG will no longer be available for new or returning clients, but the new system, which the Government hope will do a better job, will also be unavailable.

The Government need to get the horse back in front of the cart. They need to put these cuts on pause, at least until we can see what is coming forward. Their new system is still in Green Paper consultation form. The ESA cuts happen in four months. Even if the new system will be better, we have seen nothing more than consultation proposals, and we do not know when the new system will be implemented.

That view is supported by the Disability Benefits Consortium, which represents 60 disability charities. It has published an open letter today, which is signed by 74 disability charities and other organisations, including Action on Hearing Loss, Age UK, the National Autistic Society, Enable Scotland, Action for ME, Carers UK, the MS Society, the Royal College of Psychiatrists, Scope, Mencap, the Royal British Legion, Citizens Advice and dozens of others I wish I had time to mention individually, as they represent health conditions and disabilities that hon. Members' families, friends and, certainly, constituents will have. Those organisations say that this cut will undermine the Government's welcome commitment to halve the disability employment gap. Their survey of over 500 disabled people found that seven out of 10 said that ESA cuts will cause their health to suffer. More than a quarter said they sometimes cannot afford to eat on the amount they currently receive from ESA, and nearly half said that this cut will probably mean they will return to work later than they would have done.

The Government predicted that savings of £450 million a year would be realised from these cuts. Just two weeks ago, we saw the welcome publication of the health and work Green Paper, which sets out the options for the Government to create a replacement system. The budget for that for next year is £60 million, rising to £100 million by 2020-21. That does not equate to new money; it does not even match the cuts being made to ESA WRAG—a point echoed by today's open letter from the charities, which cannot see where the additional support for disabled people to find work will come from, or how it will mitigate the effects of the cut.

There must also be concern on the Treasury Bench after the Supreme Court ruling on the bedroom tax. Letters, which have been published, between the Equality and Human Rights Commission and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff) highlight the concerns the EHRC has regarding the Government's impact assessments on these cuts.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Most disabled people I know in my constituency are desperate to work if they can and would give every penny they have to get back into work, but can I just press him on one point? He said at the start of his speech that the only way we will persuade the Government to change their mind is through a Conservative Back-Bench rebellion. That is not going to happen, so can I plead with him to join me in persuading the Scottish Government to use the welfare powers they have to replace ESA for disabled people in Scotland? They have done it with the bedroom tax; let us persuade them to do it with this as well.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I remind the House that interventions must be brief.

**Neil Gray:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am disappointed in the hon. Gentleman. He knows well that ESA has not been devolved, and it is not in the Scottish Government's competence. I genuinely believe that there is a feeling on the Conservative Benches that the Government can change their mind and that there are workings under way to make that happen, so his pessimism about where the Government might be going is, I hope, unfounded.

Parkinson's UK points out that the Government's statutory obligations may not have been met, leaving them open to further legal challenge.

In conclusion, I want today to be a time for reflection for the Government. I want them to reflect on whether they truly believe that people such as John will benefit from this cut without a replacement support system being in place. I want them to listen to those 74 disability charities and other organisations, and to right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House, and I want them to pause these cuts, at least until they have delivered what they promised would be a better system. Everyone has needs, and it is important that those needs are met. I hope those are the words ringing in the ears of Ministers today.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I advise the House that, on account of the number of would-be contributors, we need to start with a limit on individual Back-Bench speeches of eight minutes, and we will see how we get on.

12.23 pm

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): I do not think I will be taking the full eight minutes, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) and to colleagues on both sides of the House for securing this important and timely debate.

Any welfare-to-work system needs to satisfy four criteria. First, it should support people and families in their times of need. Secondly, it should provide every assistance to people in moving forward and in getting back into work, where that is a realistic objective for them, taking into account their personal circumstances. Thirdly, there should be an underlying theme that work must pay, so that welfare does not become a lifestyle choice. Fourthly, any system must be affordable to the nation as a whole.

The system we have, which has evolved over many years, has, I am afraid, become incredibly complicated. It would be great if we could start with a clean sheet of paper, but I fear that is not possible, given where we are at present. The Government should be commended for taking on the challenge of seeking to reform the system and for not filing it away in the "too difficult" tray. Credit is also due to them for some of their initiatives in this Parliament and the last Parliament: taking the low-paid out of tax altogether, the introduction of the national living wage and the provision of 30 hours of free childcare.

The question today is whether the proposed changes to universal credit and ESA satisfy the four criteria I outlined. I would just like to make three observations as

to whether they do or not. First, I would like to look at whether the changes are properly researched, backed up by evidence and supported by impact assessments.

When the Welfare Reform and Work Bill was going through Parliament in the spring, it was made clear to me that reductions in ESA WRAG would be followed by a full consultation on the package of support measures to help the disabled into work. At that time a White Paper was proposed, and we were assured on the Floor of the House that it would be published before the summer recess. In the event, a Green Paper, which is actually very good, was published at the end of last month, and a consultation will now run until 17 February. I say to the Government that it surely makes sense to digest the outcome of that consultation—to get feedback from non-governmental organisations and other groups that have the detailed first-hand knowledge as to what changes we need—before making any radical changes.

There is a concern, as we heard from the hon. Gentleman, that there has not been a full and proper impact assessment on the proposed changes. It has been suggested that the impact assessments published with the original Welfare Reform and Work Bill may fall short of the Government's statutory obligation to properly analyse policy, according to the Equality and Human Rights Commission. In its report, "MS: Enough—Make welfare make sense" the MS Society has recommended that the Government undertake a full impact assessment of any changes they make to disability benefits.

There is also a concern that what is emerging is a lottery, with some family types being more adversely affected than others. Research has highlighted that two thirds of single-parent families will be hit particularly hard by the work allowance cut and the delay to childcare support.

I move on to my second issue—support for vulnerable groups. Again, there is concern that particular groups are being unfairly hit, and I have in mind those with fluctuating conditions such as Parkinson's and MS. There is also a worry that it has not been recognised that not every disabled person is able to work. The all-party group on multiple sclerosis, under the chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), has just published a report on support for people with MS in the workplace, and I urge the Government to take on board its three recommendations.

It must always be borne in mind that Parkinson's and MS are degenerative conditions: people do not get better, there is no cure, and the severity of symptoms fluctuates not just from day to day but, very often, from hour to hour. The consultation on the work capability assessment is to be welcomed, but the feedback I receive, such as that from Waveney Suffolk Help in Multiple Sclerosis—an MS support group I will be with tomorrow—is that more needs to be done.

My third issue is the roll-out of universal credit. The full roll-out of universal credit went live in Waveney on 25 May. While I acknowledge the hard work of Jobcentre Plus and DWP staff on the ground, I have to report that it is not going well. Those in my constituency office are spending most of their days addressing very real problems that people face in having nothing to live on, nothing to pay for food, and no money to pay the rent. The DWP is being helpful in addressing these cases, but I have to



question whether it is right to make further changes to universal credit at a time when there are major practical problems in its roll-out.

**Heidi Allen** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Is the universal credit that my hon. Friend has in his constituency the full version or the initial straightforward version just for single claimants?

**Peter Aldous:** We have the full version being rolled out at the moment.

I am concerned about research showing that people in areas now on universal credit will, as a result of these changes, be significantly worse off than their neighbours and those in other regions who remain within the tax credit regime. Will the Minister address these concerns? Why should the people I represent in Waveney, and indeed those in other areas where universal credit has been rolled out, be unfairly treated in this way? It is a really unfair postcode lottery.

**Justin Tomlinson** (North Swindon) (Con): There is also early evidence that those on universal credit are 13% more likely to go into work, and are getting in-work support to help them progress. They will often enter low-paid work and continue to progress, so in some cases the lottery is very beneficial to my hon. Friend's residents.

**Peter Aldous:** I thank my hon. Friend. We are yet to receive those benefits in my area, where universal credit was rolled out only on 25 May, but I am happy to look at that information.

The Government have the time to get this right. They should use the autumn statement to address these concerns, consider targeting support at those who need it most, and pause and consult. If they do those three things, they can get it right.

12.31 pm

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak on a matter that affects a large number of my constituents.

The latest employment figures show that unemployment in my constituency is twice the national average, but as we know, this forms only a small part of the problem. Both this Government and their predecessor have systematically targeted the most vulnerable in our society. Our welfare state has become a game of numbers and a debate about the bottom line, and once again Members of this House find themselves debating cuts to the incomes of those who can least afford it.

It is clear that for the vast majority of the 693 of my constituents claiming it, universal credit has been nothing short of a punitive disaster. As we sit here today, we all know of constituents across the country who struggle to choose between heating and eating, and where actually living takes second preference to just surviving. This Government's answer to that is to take another £30 from those who most need it, many of whom suffer from often debilitating disabilities. If only Conservative Members had the same levels of compassion for those living on the breadline as they do for those whose wealth knows no bounds and for whom they strive to gain tax cuts.

Gateshead has rising unemployment and rising under-employment. A lot of my constituents who are lucky enough to be in work are often working many fewer hours than they would like to, with little or no job security. We all have constituents who are living in the most terrible circumstances. My office deals daily with individuals who are suffering at the hands of a Victorian regime of sanctions and bureaucracy, dreadful administration and, I am afraid, Kafkaesque hoops through which they are expected to jump in order to claim their entitlements.

I would like to focus on one individual who really highlights the extent to which the safety net of social security has become a trap. Simon Westlake is a young lad who, because of family issues, moved to Gateshead from London, not very far from this place. He had a job working at a local supermarket, paying his way, renting a flat in Gateshead and contributing to the local community. Unfortunately, he was made redundant in February 2016.

Universal credit has been operating in Gateshead for about 18 months, so Simon reported to the local jobcentre—which has since been closed by the DWP despite an increase in those needing to use its services—to apply for universal credit. In total, Simon made nearly 10 applications, week after week, on the computers in the jobcentre, each time hoping that he would receive enough money to enable him to feed himself.

Seven weeks passed and still nothing, so Simon returned to the jobcentre, where an adviser watched him go through the online application and saw that nothing happened: no error message, no refusal, but more importantly, no claim lodged with the DWP. This lady kindly wrote a supporting letter for Simon, stating what she had witnessed, and lodged his claim over the phone—something that is very rare for the ordinary constituent.

Simon began receiving universal credit in June 2016, nearly four months after his initial application. In the meantime he had been evicted from his flat, threatened with violence by the landlord due to unpaid rent, and pursued by various utility companies and the local authority for unpaid bills. Simon was living in temporary accommodation in Gateshead, and I am afraid to say that, for a period, he was sleeping wrapped in a curtain and only able to feed himself by warming tins of soup with a tealight.

We in this House are often accused of being out of touch and living in a political bubble, but Conservative Members often do not seem interested. There are constituents in the same predicament as Simon in all our constituencies, and they need help urgently.

Simon contacted my office because the DWP had refused to backdate his universal credit to the date in February when he first applied. Despite my personal intervention, the DWP required evidence from Simon that he was in the jobcentre making online claims when he claimed to have done so. The only problem was that that jobcentre had been closed. He did not know where the staff were. He could not prove to the DWP, and the DWP could not explain to him how he was meant to prove, that he had been there in a now closed jobcentre. This would be an absolute scandal in itself, but Simon is not alone.

My question is this: how can Conservative Members vote for further cuts to a system that is already leaving our constituents living in absolute poverty, utterly destitute?

[*Ian Mearns*]

Welfare recipients and would-be recipients in this country are already shouldering a very great burden—much greater than many of them can handle. They are citizens but now dismissed as claimants representing a financial cost to a Government who regard them as numbers. The media continue, in a mythological way, to purport that they are all fraudulent claimants, while we leave people who have had a tough break in life, or are suffering from terrible illness, in crisis. This is not right. These further cuts are nothing more than a penalty for becoming ill or losing one's job.

We live in 2016. We are paid well to serve our constituents. I do not know how Conservative Members can put their constituents through the torment of further cuts in the name of unnecessary levels of austerity. I am sure that all Opposition Members can relate to Simon. For the sake of his story alone, these cuts must be opposed.

12.38 pm

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) for introducing this debate and for assembling here a large number of right hon. and hon. Members.

My father became disabled when I was two weeks old, when he was 34. He worked for the rest of his working life until he was 65. It was only after he died that I found that at one point he had had to consider emigrating to Australia in order to get work, but thanks to the foresightedness of a church in Highbury in Islington—he was a vicar—he was able to work in the United Kingdom. Throughout my childhood, as we were growing up, we saw the gradual improvement of the situation for disabled people in this country. I pay tribute to Governments of all colours over the past 50 years for that, because it has been incredibly important. I saw, for instance, the significant improvement that Motability made to his life and his ability to do his work—he benefited from the scheme from its introduction. That is why I believe that the motion should be supported and that the cuts to the work-related component in both ESA and universal credit should be paused and reconsidered.

The Government's argument, which I understand, is that they wish everybody in the work-related activity group to return to work as soon as possible, and they intend to put in money to support and assist them in that process. Three assumptions underline that argument. The first is that the cost of living for those on ESA is pretty much the same as that for those on jobseeker's allowance; in other words, it covers basic living costs. The second assumption is that any additional costs relating to sickness or disability can be covered by the personal independence payment. The third is that people will not receive ESA for very long, because they will get back into work.

On the face of it, one can assume that those assumptions are well meaning, but I would challenge all three of them. On the cost of living, those in the WRAG tend to have mental health conditions, cancer or musculoskeletal conditions, and they are often housebound for long periods. That means that they face an additional cost for heating, because they are not able to go out searching for work all the time. Macmillan says that 28% of

cancer sufferers say that they cannot keep their homes adequately warm. They also face an additional cost for food: some of the diets involved are expensive and there is no particular help available. There is also the cost of transport, as people go frequently to hospital and doctors' appointments.

The argument has been put to me that those costs could be covered by PIP, but fewer than half of those in the WRAG are eligible for and claim PIP. In any case, PIP covers mobility and care costs; it does not cover heating or dietary costs.

The final assumption, which is understandable, is that those in the WRAG will be able to return to work relatively soon, but that is not borne out by the facts. People tend to be in the WRAG for an average of two years, while the figure for JSA is six months. JSA is set at a level that assumes that people will be on it for only a few months, and it is very difficult to see how people can continue at that level without in the end getting into considerable debt. It seems to me that the assumptions, understandably made by the Government, do not hold up.

**Stephen Timms:** The hon. Gentleman will recall the commitment that was made to increase support for disabled people to get into work as a quid pro quo for the benefit cut. Does he agree, however, that it appears that the Government now propose to spend less on employment support for disabled people than has been spent on the failed Work programme? Surely they should be spending more, not less.

**Jeremy Lefroy:** I am not clear on the figures, but what I do know is that the Government are committed to providing support to people to get into work. That is absolutely vital, but I do not think it is a substitute for the additional financial help that has been given until now.

I welcome the Green Paper and the Government's work on it. I welcome the work that my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) did on it, and the work of my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, who is in her place, and everyone else at the Department for Work and Pensions. The excellent paper covers joint supporting, the promotion of mental and physical health, and occupational health support. I want all those things to be put in place, because I know that they will be of great benefit to many of my constituents. The Green Paper does not, however, cover the question of costs, and that is why I support the motion.

I want to make some constructive proposals for the Government to consider. I want them to consider modifying or postponing the changes while the proposals are consulted on and put into practice. Let us see them work: let us see people get into work more quickly before we actually remove the additional support. Let us also consider maintaining an element of support above JSA, specifically to cover the particular costs that people face, especially if they have been on the standard rate of ESA, as they will have been for a short period. It should not be indeterminate and indefinite. A discretionary fund has been used in other areas, so let us consider introducing one that is substantial enough to cover those additional costs for people in the WRAG.

I know that the Minister is listening. She has shown that in her responses to me both privately and publicly. I urge her to continue to listen, particularly to the points made by Members in this debate.

12.45 pm

**Anne McLaughlin** (Glasgow North East) (SNP): As there is a real chance of Members from all parties reaching agreement today, I will resist the temptation to talk about what I would usually talk about, which is the political ideology behind cuts to the welfare system. Instead, I will concentrate on the unfair implementation of the cuts and the counterproductiveness of removing £29 a week from people in the work-related activity group of employment and support allowance.

Let us remember that many people who are in receipt of ESA are currently unable to work because of poor health—"unable" being the operative word. Although it can be extremely difficult for jobseekers to find jobs, it is more than just difficult—it is often impossible—for those in the WRAG to do so; otherwise, they would not be in the WRAG. They therefore have fewer opportunities to improve their financial situation than someone who is able to actively seek employment. They do not have that potential light at the end of the tunnel. At the very least, their tunnel is a lot longer, because, as has been said, those on ESA tend to be on it for longer than those on JSA. For those on JSA, 60% are off it within six months, whereas the average figure for those on ESA is two to two and half years.

The sum of £73 a week is a shockingly small amount of money for anyone to have to live on. I am sure that we can all agree on that. It is a pittance, but having to live on a pittance for about six months is an entirely different proposition from having to survive on it for about two and a half years. People need the additional £29 a week simply because they have almost no prospect of any increase in their income and there is not an awful lot they can do about it.

The situation is not just unfair; it is also counter-productive. The Government say—in the spirit of consensual politics, I am willing to take them at their word—that the reason they are taking the money away is that people will be more likely to move from the WRAG into employment more quickly. The charity Scope argues that taking the money away will, in fact, take them further from the workplace, and I completely agree.

Being poor is a very time-consuming way of existing. It is a constant juggling act and a battle to stay afloat, and it takes up a lot of emotional and physical energy. For someone in the WRAG who has a disability, whether it is physical or psychological, to have to use up what little energy they have left trying not to go under financially when they are living, long term, on just £73 a week leaves them with very little energy to get well and to get the support they need to get back into the job market. Neither is it difficult to imagine the impact on the self-esteem of the dramatically increasing number—at the moment it stands at 49%—of people on ESA because of mental health problems.

To believe that keeping people on the very lowest income, rather than giving them the additional £29 a week, will help get them off the sick and into work is to believe that people are making themselves ill or swinging

the lead in order to access that extra £29 a week. Do we have such little faith in people that we honestly believe that great swathes of those currently in the WRAG would not give anything to be well, to be working and to be able to play a full part in society, and to not be looked down on by others, as is often the case?

That is not what I see, and I represent one of the most deprived constituencies in the UK. I see incredible people in Milton and Ruchazie and in Blackhill and Royston—right across Glasgow North East—who, even when they have next to nothing themselves, keep giving to and sharing with others in their communities, because they are good people in an area with very high levels of health-related unemployment.

Davy in Possilpark has a disability. He walks with a stick, sometimes struggles to breathe and is in the WRAG. But when he is up to it, he spends his time voluntarily helping very many other people in his community. He could not possibly have a job right now, as he is just not well enough often enough, but he can sit down with others, for example, in the local men's support group that he is a member of, to just listen and advise. He does that as often as he can. Davy told me that despite having that extra £29 a week he feels like a failure, because he still cannot afford to buy his granddaughter a decent Christmas present. That man is no failure, but does anybody here seriously believe that Davy likes feeling like a failure and that he would not give anything to replace his life with the one he once had, when he had his health and his job, and he was earning enough money to buy that wee girl a present that would have made her eyes light up? Does anybody honestly believe that his precious granddaughter is not motivated enough to get well and back into work?

My concern is that although every Member in here may well be thinking that they can empathise with Davy, some may also be thinking, "It is not the Davys from Possilpark of the world we're trying to sort out here, it's the others." I am anything but naive, and I can tell Members that Davy may be an exceptional man, and he is, but he is no exception to the rule. Those "others", like Davy, would also rather be working, and an extra £29 a week will not stop them doing it, when they are able to. Removing that £29 a week will, however, make getting well and getting into the workforce much, much harder, and I appeal to the Government to please think again.

12.51 pm

**Justin Tomlinson** (North Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, although I have a feeling of déjà vu, as I was talking about this subject only yesterday—no wonder "Groundhog Day" is one of my favourite films. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) for his proactive work in this area. When I was a Minister, I enjoyed engaging with him on a number of occasions. He always brought forward real experience and practical suggestions to challenge the Government and hold them to account in this important area. It is also good to see so many Members in the Chamber, on both sides of the House, to engage in this debate—it is a credit to them. That is important, because the Department has excellent Ministers who genuinely do listen, engage, act and influence the direction of policy.



[Justin Tomlinson]

I wish briefly to talk about the background to the current position. Yesterday I talked a lot about universal credit and less about the ESA WRAG, but today I will flip that around. The Government have introduced the national living wage, which has helped 2.75 million of our lowest earners, and we hope that it will rise to more than £9 an hour by 2020. We have increased the personal allowance from £6,495 to £11,000, taking the lowest 3.2 million earners out of paying any income tax. This country has the strongest economic growth of any developed economy, which is delivering record employment, with yesterday's figures showing another 461,000 people entering work. We have also seen 590,000 more disabled people in work in the past three years—an increase of about 4%—although there is still much further to go.

**Stephen Timms:** I mentioned this yesterday, but let me remind the hon. Gentleman of the press release issued in his name by the Department for Work and Pensions on 29 June last year, which stated:

“The Government... aims to halve the gap between the disabled employment rate and the overall employment rate by 2020.”

Is he dismayed, as I am, that that commitment—he made the promise in good faith, I am sure—to a 2020 deadline has been abandoned by his successor?

**Justin Tomlinson:** I predicted that that intervention was coming, and it is an important point. The pledge was incredibly popular with stakeholders and focused officials' minds. When I was a Minister, a lot of my work involved lobbying other Departments, so it was helpful when I was able to namecheck the then Prime Minister, as this was his personal pledge. I do not actually recall that press release, as my understanding was that we had not set the date because that was going to be determined in the Green Paper. Personally, I wanted to see significant progress year on year.

One problem with just adopting the approach in the pledge is that the number of disabled people in work could remain static yet in a recession the overall number of people in work could fall, meaning that the gap would close without any more disabled people benefiting. I wanted to set a target such as having 1 million more people in work by a certain date, which would mean that we would know that 1 million more disabled people had benefited. We were due to consult on that as part of the Green Paper process when I was in my ministerial role.

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Gentleman that a single target can be a crude measure, so would it not have been sensible to have had two targets: to halve the disability employment gap by 2020, as the Department appeared to be committed to doing last year; and a numerical target? Does he think the new ministerial team might consider that suggestion?

**Justin Tomlinson:** I think that is twice as good as the current plans—it is a brilliant suggestion. All these targets focus minds, and this one made a difference in terms of pushing. That was a lot of what we had to do. We did not necessarily have all the levers ourselves, so having that target to focus minds makes a significant difference.

Wages have increased by 2.3% this year against the backdrop of an inflation rate of 0.9%—that fell again this week, helping people. We have also extended childcare. Let me briefly talk about universal credit, which will make a significant difference.

**George Kerevan** (East Lothian) (SNP): When the hon. Gentleman talks about rising incomes and wages, the implication is that more people in work will benefit, but as a result of the collapse in the value of sterling, the Bank of England predicts a 10% fall in real incomes over the next three years.

**Justin Tomlinson:** We are awash with predictions from experts, as we have been since the middle of the referendum campaign. So-called experts predicted that inflation would spike this week, but we saw it fall. We will see what happens. Good Governments keep a close eye on these things and act accordingly.

We are still some way away from the full roll-out of universal credit, but our aspiration and the difference that this will make for people are significant, because through universal credit people will have a named work coach. The hon. Members for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) highlighted some examples of people's experiences, and we have all encountered difficult cases in which the system has failed. One key advantage of the full roll-out of universal credit is that every claimant will have a personal, named coach who will stay with them. The job of the coach is not only to help people to get into work, but to navigate all the challenges they face when dealing with complex benefits. If the system does not support claimants in the way it should, the coach will help them to address that. People will not have to rely on going to their Member of Parliament, councillors or local citizens advice bureau, and that will make a significant difference.

**Ian Mearns:** I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman makes, but my constituent was unable to get any backdating and was left destitute. The Department's behaviour was outrageous, and I am sorry to say that all I can see is a cost-cutting exercise.

**Justin Tomlinson:** I do not recognise this as a cost-cutting exercise, but without knowing all the details, it is difficult to comment. I hope that the ministerial team will look at this, meet the hon. Gentleman and find out whether there are lessons to be learned.

These coaches will also signpost where training is available to enhance people's hopes of getting into work or progressing in work. Obviously, the traditional job-searching work will be done and, for the first time, these coaches will also provide support for people as they go into work. A lot of people coming off benefits will go into relatively or very low-paid work and will not necessarily have the confidence or skills to push themselves forward to get roles with higher wages. For the first time, these coaches will keep in touch with those people and say, for example, “You have turned up for work for three months; why don't you now try to go for a supervisor role or increase your hours?”

Crucially, for people with fluctuating health conditions the benefit is in real time, so if people can work fewer hours one week than another, they will have a minimum

income. The process goes from there, so if they do more hours, the income increases. This system removes the 16-hour cliff edge that was preventing people from benefiting.

Today's debate is predominantly about ESA WRAG. Before I comment about that, I pay tribute, as I did yesterday, to the fantastic work of the staff in jobcentres, support groups such as the Shaw Trust and Pluss, and the many local charities and national charities that provide support. They do a huge amount of brilliant work and often go unrecognised. ESA has had so many reviews and changes, yet still only 1% of people come off the benefit every month. That cannot be described as doing anything other than failing the people who are on it. A number of speakers highlighted the fact that people are typically on ESA for two years, whereas someone on JSA would expect to get into work much sooner. Bizarrely, people on JSA, who are closer to the jobs market, would get 710 minutes of professional support, whereas those on ESA, who are recognised as further away from the jobs market, would get only 105 minutes of that support. Some of the changes that are being introduced will equalise the position. It is crucial that we identify what people can do, not what they cannot do.

We are all different, and we all have challenges in our lives. Some people have more challenges than others, but most have an opportunity with the right support. The Green Paper is welcome, because it highlights the significance of that "can do" approach. We have to offer personalised and tailored support to give everybody an opportunity. Crucially, the major charities, including Scope, Leonard Cheshire Disability, the Royal National Institute of Blind People, the National Autistic Society and Mencap, as well as many other charities, right down to the smaller ones, will be contributing to the development and delivery of this policy. They will make a big difference.

**Heidi Allen:** I agree that those charities are very welcoming of the new Green Paper, but does my hon. Friend agree that they are still consistent in saying with one voice that the cuts to the ESA WRAG are wrong, and that they are not replaced in the Green Paper?

**Justin Tomlinson:** When I was a Minister, I was challenged on a whole host of issues, and that is what the charities are there to do. I feel that the extra support makes this approach worthwhile because only 1% of people are coming off that benefit. When people on ESA are surveyed, and when we talk to them in our constituencies, we find that the overwhelming majority are desperate to be given an opportunity to work.

**Stephen Timms** *rose*—

**Justin Tomlinson:** I am running out of time, so I will try to wrap up. I have only two minutes left.

The Green Paper includes proposals for more personalised and tailored support, as well as quicker assessments. That is particularly important because 50% of people on ESA have a mental health condition, but typically wait nine months for an assessment. The Green Paper will address that by making sure that people are assessed quickly and given support before they navigate often difficult personal challenges when they take the step back into work.

There will be a place on the work and health programme or Work Choice for those who wish to take it—it is a voluntary opportunity. There will be additional places on the very popular specialist employment support programme. There will be job clubs run by peers—people with disabilities who have gone through the system and overcome their fear at the thought of going back into the process. That is often a big fear for people who have been out of work for a long time. There will be 200 new community partners; again, this is about utilising disability expertise. There will be increased access to work for young people with mental health conditions. There are further opportunities through the Disability Confident campaign.

My personal favourite, which I continue to champion, is the small employer offer. Time and time again, employers say to us, "We have skills gaps and we are struggling to find people to fill these roles," but they have never thought to take on somebody with a disability because they lack the confidence to do so and do not realise that a huge amount of support is provided to help people to come into the workplace. Businesses that take that step benefit, more often than not, and I say that as a former employer who employed disabled people and benefited from doing so. I hope that the current small employer pilot will be expanded and will become a nationwide offer. It is making a significant difference.

The Chancellor was right to increase significantly the funding for Access to Work. On the fit for work scheme, we need to ensure that we provide advice at the beginning of a potential problem for people in work, not just at four weeks, because it is so much easier to keep people in work with suitable support than it is to get them back into work after they have dropped out. We have a fantastic ministerial team who are engaging with charities, with all their experience and knowledge, and the Green Paper represents a real opportunity.

1.3 pm

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson). I pay tribute to him for his work and the commitment that he showed when he was the Minister for Disabled People. I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) and thank him for introducing the debate. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee and its Chair for making time for this debate.

I join colleagues in expressing our deep concern about these cuts, which are based on several misconceptions and the effect of which will be cruel and perverse. Everybody wants disabled people and those with long-term health problems who can work to do so, and to have the support to do so. Everyone agrees that those people face additional barriers and may need that additional help.

As we have heard, the Government have published a Green Paper that makes a number of welcome proposals for improving that support for disabled people. I welcome in particular the replacement of the disastrous Work programme with personalised, tailor-made support for disabled people. I welcome the introduction of specialist work coaches, who will support the disability employment advisers in jobcentres, but I regret the fact that the number of disability employment advisers was reduced

[Kate Green]

under the coalition Government. I welcome, too, the introduction of the health and work conversations, although it is a pity that they had to come in several years after the coalition Government prematurely scrapped Labour's work-focused health-related assessments.

All those additional measures of support are proposed in the Green Paper, but it is none the less surely perverse to cut benefits for disabled people before the support is in place. There is no evidence at all that cutting financial support makes people more likely to move into work. Indeed, investigation by our colleagues in the House of Lords, Lord Low and the Baronesses Meacher and Grey-Thompson, has shown that the opposite is the case. They point out that it becomes more difficult when financial resources are reduced for disabled people to afford training and to undertake volunteering opportunities or work experience that could help them to move towards work. The Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research in 2011 confirmed that cutting benefit for those who are unable to work because of illness does not result in more people moving towards work because it does not address the barriers they face—their health, employer attitudes, availability of suitable jobs, lack of reasonable adjustments or skills gaps—which the Government's Green Paper acknowledges and seeks to address.

Ministers have said, particularly during proceedings last year on the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, that an additional £30 a week of benefit disincentivises disabled people from working. There is no evidence at all for that. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts pointed out, removing the £30 of additional support creates perverse incentives. If someone leaves the ESA to try to find work and they find that it does not work for them, after April 2017, when they reapply for benefit, they will be treated as a new claimant. They will not be able to retain the protection of the additional £30, which existing claimants will retain. Other people are likely to move from the ESA WRAG into the support group, where they will not be expected to look for work at all.

The proposals fail to recognise the nature and purpose of ESA for those in the WRAG. It is an income replacement benefit, in recognition of the fact that those in the WRAG have undergone a work capability assessment that has found that they are not currently fit for work. Employers, in many cases, would not have them in the workplace. Those employers would say that it was not safe to do so. In such circumstances, by definition, an individual cannot derive income from earnings, hence the need for the income replacement benefit. As we have heard several times this afternoon, because of the longer journey to return to work that people with disabilities and health conditions experience, there is a need for additional financial support and a higher rate of benefit.

I would like to say little bit about the support in universal credit for those with limited capability for work. Those people are set to lose out even if they are in work. At the moment, the limited capability for work element and the additional support through the disabled person's work allowance in universal credit are roughly comparable to the support in tax credits for disabled people working 16 hours a week. If those in work on universal credit lose additional support, they will be

substantially worse off than those on tax credits. That is surely a perverse outcome of these cuts that Ministers will want to address.

All such perverse outcomes might have been avoided and the policy improved if an equalities impact assessment had been properly carried out at the time of parliamentary proceedings on the legislation. As we have heard, the Equality and Human Rights Commission offered help with such an assessment and set out a methodology for carrying it out. Regrettably, that suggestion was rejected by the then Government.

**Heidi Allen:** Did the EHRC not offer to do that assessment for free? I seem to remember that it did, such was its wish to contribute.

**Kate Green:** I do not know whether the EHRC offered to do the assessment at no cost, but it certainly set out a substantial and detailed methodology by which the assessment could be carried out. Further, when the Government produced their own rather thin analysis, the EHRC was very clear that it was unsupported by evidence and that it was insufficient.

We now have the Green Paper, which has some welcome proposals and a welcome ambition to halve the disability employment gap, although as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) pointed out, we do not know when that goal is to be reached. I hope that the Minister will consider the suggestion, which I think the hon. Member for North Swindon supports, that we should consider more than one measure of success in assessing disability employment.

I must tell the Minister that, for all the good in the Green Paper, her proposals will be seriously undermined if she proceeds with the current cut before the proposals have had a chance to take effect. There is no justification for making sick and disabled people poorer. It will not help them to recover, and it will not help them to find work. Disability charities, Opposition MPs and, indeed, MPs from the Minister's own party have all expressed their deep disquiet about the proposals. It is not too late to think again, to call a pause on this cut and to ensure that disabled people receive the financial support to enable them both to maintain a decent standard and quality of living and, where they can, to have the wherewithal to look for work, prepare for work and take the steps on the journey back to work that so many of them are desperate to make.

1.10 pm

**Heidi Allen** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): As all speakers have done so far today, I thank the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) for bringing this debate to the House. I am glad that Members on both sides of the House are contributing to this debate, which is such an important one.

When I look back at my first year as an MP, I cannot think of a vote that has been so regretted by my colleagues on the Government Benches. I remember the pressure we all felt at the end of February, when the ESA WRAG element of welfare reform was being batted between this House and the Lords. I remember the feeling of desperation when this House sent it back. I abstained in the vote as a plea to the Government to rethink their decision, knowing the Lords would have



one more opportunity to convince the Government, too. The Lords stuck to their guns and sent it back one more time, and I remember the relief when it did.

As a new MP, I was still trying to understand how the relationship between the two Houses worked, but I was exhilarated that the Lords was willing us on and watching and nudging us like a parent, hoping we would finally do the right thing. However, that sense of optimism was short-lived, as we failed in this House on the Bill's final return. So few of us on the Government side voted with the Lords on its amendment, because many believed a White Paper was imminent and would describe what alternative support would be made available, and there was a promise of some £100 million. However, the White Paper never came and the money never came, and I know that some of my colleagues have regretted their vote ever since.

**Dr Tania Mathias** (Twickenham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some very important points. Does she agree that Members who supported, as I did, the Government changes to the ESA in March did so on the absolute understanding that there would, in parallel, be appropriate support for people getting into work? Although the Green Paper is laudable, it will not be implemented in time, and therefore the ESA changes have to be delayed.

**Heidi Allen:** Absolutely. I could not have put it more succinctly myself. It was because of that promise and guarantee that Members opted to support the Government, but, unfortunately, that has not yet been fulfilled.

Most heartbreakingly of all, the Lords was not asking for much. It was not so naive as not to accept that the ESA system needed reform, as it so clearly does. The announcement from our new Secretary of State that the whole work capability assessment process will be reviewed is very welcome. I sense this is a precious opportunity, and our disability charities, which have been invited to do so, are poised and eager to contribute to the review. I know that we will do better. I am confident that my Government will do better. The Green Paper is the first step in this process, and charities have welcomed it. With charities, as well as organisations such the Conservative Disability Group, for which I am the parliamentary link, the expertise exists to help us. I am so encouraged by the opportunities that lie ahead, and I sense transformation is possible.

However, my discomfort—this was expressed by the Lords when we last debated this issue—is about having agreed the proposals for new support before we took away the extra £30 per week for those in the ESA WRAG, individuals recovering from significant illness who are slowly transitioning to work. The Government's argument was that the WRAG support was not doing its job, with individuals sometimes on it for up to two years. The Government concluded there was some perverse financial incentive for people to stay in that group. I say now, as I said at the time, that the fact that people are stuck in the group says more about the failure of DWP processes than about claimants' active choices. People in that group do not have an easy time. They must demonstrate an appetite to transition towards work, and they can be sanctioned if they do not do so. I still maintain that anyone who has beaten a significant illness is desperate to get back to normal and to get their life back.

The Lords back in February and March, many of us in this House then and many of us today are just asking for a pause. What harm could it possibly do to the Government's plans or reputation if we were to pause these cuts until an alternative support plan was agreed? Moreover, I passionately believe that it is the sensible and moral thing to do. Would we still be having this debate, would it still be the first thing on the lips of every health and disability charity and would MPs still talk of their regret if we had made the right decision last time around?

I have a guiding principle in life: we should always listen to the loudest voice in our head. We may choose to ignore it, or try and drown it out with distractions and alternative arguments, but we know it is there. In fact, we can sometimes see it when we look in the mirror. I think that we all know what that voice is saying: let us just pause these cuts. The £30—I repeat, £30—represents 29% of the weekly income of some 500,000 people, which is big money for relatively few people. Let us just pause. The risk of damage is high, and the financial cost of pausing is low.

What kind of Government do we want to be? If we want to be a unity Government, rallying and rejoining the nation after the splits caused by Brexit, how will we explain such a vision to two cancer sufferers—I picture them sitting side by side in hospital to have chemotherapy—who are receiving different levels of welfare support, because one was a claimant pre-April 2017 and one became a claimant just afterwards? If we are saying that we will continue to make the payment to those already on it, that must mean we acknowledge that the benefit has some value.

The Green Paper talks about the flexible support fund, which is promising, but it is only £15 million for 2017-18 and 2018-19. The Green Paper suggests that it could be used to buy mentoring or additional support, so could some of it be used to give direct financial support to claimants as well? If ESA WRAG is not the answer, perhaps a boosted support fund, consistently applied by well-trained jobcentre work coaches to provide additional financial support where needed, could be an acceptable alternative. I am open to such a suggestion, and I suspect my colleagues the Opposition Benches would be, too.

If we get the work allowance rates in universal credit right, we could support those transitioning back to work in that way, rather than their facing a cliff edge of having the £30 withdrawn the moment they enter work. That scenario would most definitely keep people away from the workplace, as they would be worried about losing money if they suffered a temporary, but debilitating, health relapse. As I keep saying, the work allowances in universal credit hold the key: because we can set them individually for every type of claimant, universal credit could offer the ultimate flexibility for the disabled and those recovering from poor health. It would offer them reactive, flexible and unwavering support on their entire journey in and out of work. However, for this group of vulnerable claimants, the work allowances need to be higher.

Whether it is a bigger flexible support fund or work allowances in universal credit set at the right level specifically to help those with disabilities or long-term health conditions, let us talk about these options and

[Heidi Allen]

see whether they hold the answer. We are so close now. With the Green Paper, a new Secretary of State, a new Prime Minister and a new Government, we have a priceless opportunity to build a system that supports and realises the aspirations of people with disabilities and health conditions. That is clearly this Government's proud and right mission, so let us not waste it by retrospectively fitting policies to savings targets that were agreed in a completely different era.

1.18 pm

**Mark Durkan** (Foyle) (SDLP): Like other hon. Members, I commend the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) for introducing the debate in the terms he did, and I commend other hon. Members for the way in which they have addressed the issues. Hon. Members have rightly reflected on what the impact will be on a range of their constituents. They have reflected on the questions they have received from a number of policy groups that campaign on behalf of people with disabilities and people with variable conditions. These changes will have a huge and grave impact on those people.

Whenever the Welfare Reform and Work Bill was discussed on its way through the House, several of us, on both sides of the House, specifically opposed clauses 13 and 14 in the original Bill—we are addressing those clauses, particularly clause 13, today—and I pay tribute to those Conservative Back Benchers who expressed concerns and misgivings at the time; some even voted accordingly.

We need to remember that what drove all that was the welfare cap. It was a bit of a flagship for the Government in the last Parliament, but ended up becoming the search engine for more and more cuts. That was recognised even by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith). He was almost grinning like a horse chewing thistles when the measures were first brought forward—there could not be enough of them—but then even he began to see that the way in which the welfare cap had become a search engine for the Treasury to find more and more cuts was doing harm and injury to his conception of universal credit, not least in terms of the very measures addressed in the motion of the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts.

Today is our opportunity, ahead of the autumn statement next week, to lay down a marker and say that, given all the developments and circumstances, perhaps we should pause and think whether we have to follow through with this cut. The Government rightly stopped on the tax credits changes, and hon. Members on both sides of the House were rightly seized of the problems connected to those changes. What we are debating today is the longer-term effect—the sting in the tail of those proposals. These longer-term measures are the after-effects that result from that same mind set.

We have a new range of Ministers in different Departments, including the Treasury. They have seen fit to say that they are not bound by the constraints of previous pronouncements, nor even by the terms of previous legislation passed by the same Government. I ask them to find some time and space on these issues.

I hope that at no point will Ministers use the specious argument that they have committed to these changes, have framed them and are bound by them. In particular,

I do not ever want to hear Ministers say that one reason why they have to stay on this course is because, unfortunately, there was a legislative consent motion in the Northern Ireland Assembly specifically endorsing the clauses of the Bill that brought the changes in. That legislative consent motion was passed in the Assembly at the hands of Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist party as a way of handing direct rule powers back to Westminster—supposedly temporarily—on welfare reform. It dealt not just with the Northern Ireland (Welfare Reform) Act 2015, but referred to the clauses of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill as originally tabled in Westminster. This is our chance to make it clear to the Government that they are not bound by those clauses as originally tabled or passed, but can and should find a new way. I hope that the Government will do that.

I have heard the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work at different events in Parliament speak directly to activist groups and patient groups, and people with disabilities. She has spoken with some heart and sincerity about her hopes for what will come from the Green Paper. Many people have engaged positively with that, as we have heard from Members on both sides of this House. No one is decrying the potential of the Green Paper. But it will mean nothing if we do not put a brake on the cuts that are to come in next year. We cannot pretend that the tyre is only flat at the bottom and say that people will be taking a hit now but good things will come again eventually.

People cannot understand why they have to bear the burden of the cuts now. The Chancellor is now saying that he will not promise to deliver on expenditure and deficit levels on the same terms as his predecessor, and people are hearing understandable questions about quantitative easing. If that is the climate now, and given the scale of quantitative easing that has taken place, people cannot understand why the punitive squeezing has to be of those who will bear the brunt of these cuts—the people for whom other hon. Members have spoken so well and so strongly today.

I hope that the Minister listens to the strength of opinion across the House. I hope she listens to her colleagues, here in the Chamber and in the corridors outside and in other meetings. They are saying that we can find a better way on this and should alter course. We are better than this, we can do better than this and the people we represent need better than this.

1.24 pm

**Mr David Burrowes** (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate. I have signed the motion, which represents a cross-party concern and call to the Government. I very much commend the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) not only for securing the debate but for his constructive tone. Some restraint was shown by the Scottish National party in avoiding what the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who is no longer in place, sadly lapsed into, namely seeking to politicise an issue about which there is cross-party concern. When we deal with welfare there is a sad tendency to get into a narrative—one that I wholly reject—about Conservatives not caring for the vulnerable with their austerity cuts. On the right, we then get the narrative that this is all about the workshy. I reject both narratives, which, sadly, can end up weaponising welfare.

Today's debate is constructive. Reference has been made to bravery on the Conservative side. Frankly, it is not particularly brave to support this motion. But this is not a binary issue. I support the bravery shown by my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) when a Minister, and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) as well. It takes a lot of bravery to reform disability welfare, which had been unreformed for too long. There is bravery on the ministerial Bench as well—it would have been easier not to go down this route. But there was nothing brave about a status quo that left only 1% of the group affected able to get into work.

The people who are really brave are those trying to make ends meet. As we know, people who are disabled have disproportionately higher costs than others. They are trying to travel, or to deal with energy costs. They are trying to do what they all want to do—to get better and get into work. Through no fault of their own, some of them are not able to do so. They are brave. They are the people we care about, and we need to do more for them.

Politics at the moment is a topsy-turvy world. Some may say that it is topsy-turvy for me to be involved in a motion that is predominantly supported by SNP Members; nevertheless, the motion is cross-party. It is a topsy-turvy motion, to the extent that it was drafted before the Green Paper was published. In essence, the issue is topsy-turvy, as has been mentioned, because it would have made so much more sense to have a White Paper before the decision was made on this cut, so that we could see the direction of travel and see what the parallel track of financial and practical support for these claimants would be.

Still, here we are. Some might say that I am being somewhat topsy-turvy in my position on this issue. I voted for the cuts in February. I stand by that vote, and maintain that we can look to a better reformed system. But as I said at the time—and many hon. Friends held the same position:

“I recognise that the WRAG is not fit for purpose, as only 1% are getting into work, but it does have a purpose. It has a purpose for the most vulnerable individuals, for whom the financial element of £30 really matters...As we move towards 2017, with the flow of new applicants, we must do all we can to reassure everyone that we are in the business of reform...I will support the Government tonight, but we must get the White Paper out and show our practical support in meaningful ways before 2017.”—[*Official Report*, 23 February 2016; Vol. 606, c. 235.]

Today's motion is about making sure we deliver on that. A considerable number of hon. Friends gave conditional support because we want to ensure that we deliver for those claimants.

I recognise that there has been good progress. The latest employment stats, as has been mentioned, show that 590,000 disabled people are in work. That is much better than three years ago, with an increase of some 4%. However, that still constitutes a scandal of five in 10 disabled people in employment compared with eight in 10 non-disabled people. We must do so much more. Recent announcements from Ministers have been encouraging, not least that yesterday on homeless people and people with mental health illness facing sanctions. The Secretary of State said:

“We want our jobseekers to focus on getting into work and enjoying the dignity and security of a good job.”

Those fine words also need to be applied properly to WRAG claimants. We need to realise the vision in the Green Paper of a new era of joint working between the welfare and health systems. By April, that long-term vision must be a reality for this group of people. It is important and encouraging to provide coaches, the Access to Work and Fit for Work schemes, and personalised integrated support. The Disability Confident scheme is also important, as is removing prejudice where some look to difference and otherness rather than positive diversity. All of that comes together, but we need to do something about the £30. Perhaps one way to deal with it is to look at the flexible support fund as a way of bridging the gap.

We must ensure that, as we move into 2017, financial and practical support is available. The 2013 incarnation of the support fund managed only to assist people with getting job interviews. It must be about much more than that. I want to hear from the Minister that this will be a much more integrated package, which incorporates the vision in the Green Paper. Let us grasp that vision and ensure it becomes a reality. Let us make sure there is local discretion on disability that pulls together practical health and welfare needs, not just a one-size-fits-all approach. The words in the Green Paper need to become a reality for the new WRAG claimants.

I appreciate that the Green Paper has far wider aims, aspirations and objectives. Those of us on the Conservative Benches—we have a good track record, which we can be proud of; we spend more than Labour did when it was in office and will continue to do so, despite the cuts for this group of people—must accept that there is a credibility and confidence gap on how we support the most vulnerable and disabled. We must not lose on this, but recognise that the great approach in the Green Paper can be realised by showing real practical support, particularly as we get to April. The new WRAG claimants will still need that £30 support for travel, heating and so on.

I believe that, as we approach April, the way in which we show our support and care for the vulnerable and disabled is a litmus test for the Green Paper. I look forward to hearing from the Minister today. I will be working with Ministers on how we can ensure practical, integrated support to meet that test and to deliver for this group of people.

1.32 pm

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): We are discussing whether the state can afford to give less than 1% of its citizens, who have been assessed as unfit to work through illness or disability, £30 a week to help them to get through their lives. In one sense, it is a remarkably small amount of money, yet for the people involved it is really quite major. In some cases, it makes a difference of up to a third of the money they subsist on over the course of a week.

I want to deal first with the question introduced by the architects of the policy. It was put about that somehow the existence of more money on employment and support allowance would create a disincentive for the people in that category to seek employment, compared with those on jobseeker's allowance. It was thought that this extra payment would somehow create a disincentive to their search for work. That argument is possible only if we assume that the needs of people claiming ESA are no different from and no greater than those who claim JSA. I hope that by now the Government are persuaded



[Tommy Sheppard]

by the testimony, given by many Members from across the House about individual constituents in this situation, that that is not the case. People on ESA have greater needs and that is why the additional payment is justified.

We know that many people who claim ESA are in an isolated and vulnerable position. Many are temporarily housebound. They spend much more time at home than their able-bodied peers, which means that their household bills are greater. We know that many people have a condition that may suddenly mean they have to get a taxi or may face some extra expense that other people do not face. We also know that some people are using this money to buy medical supplies not available on the NHS for their condition. The extra payment is there to assist people, to help them to cope with the conditions they suffer from while they try to get back into employment. The House really has to recognise that.

It is particularly iniquitous to have some people continue to claim £109 a week, while others in an identical situation who make a fresh claim will be paid less. How, as a matter of public policy, can we justify that? The Government suggest that this will affect only new claimants and that those already on the benefit need not be too concerned. In fact, the people already claiming the benefit are extremely concerned, because the nature of the benefit is such that we are talking about recurrent claims. People need the benefit for a period of time, after which they may have a period of employment before having to rely on the benefit again. Many such people suffer from mental illnesses, such as anxiety and depression. In that condition, I cannot think of anything worse than knowing that, were they to take a job offer that does not work out, when they ask the state for help again they will be offered £30 less than the amount they currently receive. That situation will exacerbate the mental illnesses that many people face.

I was impressed yesterday when the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), said that there is not a simple dichotomy of being either fit for work and not receiving benefit, or being unfit for work and receiving benefit. There are lots of shades of grey and nuances. If people are unable to work at all and are in need of permanent support, they are transferred to a support group. The WRAG claimants are trying to get back into the job market. The support they receive is to enable them to get back into employment. Far from incentivising people, I fear that if this cut goes ahead it will drive many people into deeper despair and greater isolation, and make it less likely that they will be able to enter the jobs market. For that reason, I ask the Government to think again.

The Minister is listening intently and I appreciate that. I ask the Government to consider the character of this debate: the language being used and how the arguments are being presented. It is the job of the Government to govern and make decisions, and it is the job of the Opposition to attack those decisions. Such is the rough and tumble of politics. However, I ask the Government to note that in this instance that is not the nature of the debate. Members from across the House have come together to make a heartfelt plea for reconsideration of this particular policy. I am hopeful that we will get some

movement. I do not accuse the Department for Work and Pensions of malicious intent towards disabled people. Tomorrow, I will be speaking at a DWP conference in Edinburgh at the Hibernian stadium, which will bring 100 local employers together to try to encourage them to take on people with disabilities and to explain the precise support the Government can give to them as employers. That is a good thing and I welcome the Green Paper, on which we can have a debate and consultation.

What sense does it make to pursue this cut now, introduce it in April and reduce the benefit for potentially 600,000 people, while considering how to improve the situation for the very same group of people? Surely the most sensible thing to do is to press the pause button and to put off any final decision on the level of support that claimants in this particular category receive until after April next year. There would then be the opportunity to look at the other means of support available, consider the consequences of the discussion on the Green Paper and then take a balanced decision. It seems to me that we actually jeopardise and hinder some of the potential improvements by making this cut now.

Somebody once said that when you're in a hole, stop digging. I appeal to the Government to consider doing exactly that. I also appeal to them again to understand the nature and the tenor of the debate. People from across the House are coming together and trying to build a golden bridge over which the Government can retreat. I urge them to cross that bridge. I promise that if that happens, they will not find people on this side of the House condemning them for making a U-turn. Rather, we will salute them for doing the right thing.

1.40 pm

**Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on securing this important debate, and I welcome its tone, not least because when this change was first proposed, there was such heat and rhetoric that I had to field very many calls from distressed constituents. One in particular stays with me to this day: a father concerned that he was about to lose the benefits associated with supporting his eight-year-old daughter. It is hugely important, therefore, when we speak about such changes, that we be mindful of the people who might be affected by it, so as not to cause undue distress.

This important debate is an opportunity for us to challenge the Government and raise concerns and for the Minister to offer reassurances, particularly on the position of existing claimants and those on reassessment and on the grace period extended to those who move into work. For them, it should not be game over; rather, their support should continue, or they might face too early a challenge. I hope to hear the Minister reassure people in receipt of that benefit.

I welcome the comments made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) about abandoning the ideology that has sadly underpinned this debate. It is not driven by ideology. As we have heard today, there are many Members on both sides of the House who have compassion and want the best for everyone in our country, whatever their position, background or—crucially—disability. As a Member of Parliament with disabled family members, I can say there is nothing more important to me.

Moving into the world of work is a hugely positive step for people, and it brings with it identity, purpose and connection, but when only 1% of claimants are doing so, we must recognise that the system has failed. Whatever the cause, whether it be the assessment or the fact that people should actually be in the support group, one in 100 is simply not good enough.

We need always to remember the bigger aspiration when we are talking about benefits and work. I share the concerns over the changes to ESA. We have heard many speeches from hon. Members expressing those concerns eloquently and movingly, and I would endorse the proposals from my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy).

Work is a hugely positive thing, as has been recognised by Governments of all hues and colours, not least by the previous Labour Government in a DWP report that associated the renewal of work with positive mental health outcomes. I am a member of the all-party group on disability, which has an imminent report containing a host of recommendations not just about reforming support services to help people into work but about the need to reform our attitudes to disability in the workplace.

I welcome the Green Paper, especially for its engagement with disability charities. On the change to WRAG, I have been contacted by many constituents who share the concerns expressed today, so I am looking forward to some reassurances, and, on the motion, I would support a pause in the implementation of these changes. Equally, however, I am pleased that the Government have already announced new schemes and initiatives, rather than waiting until 2017 to make those changes. I particularly welcome the abolition of the permitted work rules, which will allow ESA claimants to work more than 16 hours a week without the immediate cessation of ESA payments. What more perverse situation is there? The Government have recognised that and responded positively. Likewise, there is the additional funding for access to work, the work and health unit and the discretionary flexible support fund, which will help thousands more people with disabilities to move into work, or at least to begin that journey.

I also recognise, however, that there is far more to do than simply looking to central Government. The all-party group's report makes several suggestions at a grass-roots level, such as ensuring that disabled entrepreneurs are integrated into local business networks, such as the Federation of Small Businesses and the chambers of commerce. We have an exceptionally active chamber in Eastbourne, and I look forward to discussing further with it what more can be done to enhance employment opportunities for people with disabilities in Eastbourne and Willingdon. Likewise, the BIG Futures event next year, aimed at school leavers, will for the first time have a strong Disability Confident element to it. That is change; that is progress, and I welcome that.

To close, all change is unsettling, but I am looking today for assurances, and I would encourage all those with strong views to contribute to the Green Paper, because we all want to see the right policies that support people with disabilities back into work and ensure that they can enjoy the same life opportunities.

1.46 pm

**Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): I am glad to be following the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell). I agree with her and other Conservative Members that these cuts should at least be paused. On 27 January, Lord Freud said in the other place:

“we are proposing to recycle some of the money currently spent on cash payments...into practical support”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords, 27 January 2016; Vol. 768, c. 1316.*]

That was the deal offered to us—there would be a shift from cash payments to practical support. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) and others are absolutely right to point out that that practical support will not be in place by next April, so that is a good argument for pausing the cuts.

Not only will the support not be in place next April, but as far as I can see, the Government are not even planning to spend as much on their new programme for supporting ESA claimants into work as they are spending on the Work programme which, as we have heard, has done a hopeless job for people claiming ESA. I thought that the whole point of this benefit cut was to give additional resources to support those people into work, but it appears that the Government are now talking about spending less. The £60 million to £100 million we have heard about is not on top of what is currently being spent; it is instead of what is currently being spent, which seems completely contrary to what we have been assured throughout this process.

In 1998, when I held the Minister's post, I was responsible for the new deal for disabled people. That was followed by the Pathways to Work programme. On 1 July, the House of Commons Library produced the briefing note “Key Statistics on People with Disabilities in Employment”. It helpfully shows, with a graph, that the disability employment gap fell steadily but substantially from 1998 to 2010. In 2010, the new deal was replaced by the Work programme, and the steady progress on reducing the disability employment gap came to a halt. As the Green Paper candidly acknowledges at paragraph 1.22, there has been no progress in reducing the disability employment gap since 2010. The progress we have heard about from some Conservative Members, particularly the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), has not involved any progress at all in reducing the disability employment gap, which reflects the fact that the Work programme has been so disappointing for this particular group.

I think that the Conservative party recognised that it had a problem, so its manifesto for 2015 to 2020 announced a bold target of halving the disability employment gap. Achieving that by 2020 would be ambitious, because progress would have more than caught up with the rate that was steadily delivered between 1998 and 2010. Ministers said that they would achieve that bold ambition by committing the proceeds of the benefit cut that we are debating today. They told us that the details would be set out in a White Paper.

As the former Secretary of State ruefully observed yesterday, there has still been no White Paper. When launching the Green Paper, the current Secretary of State made this astonishing claim:

“The original commitment in the manifesto did not have an end date”—[*Official Report, 31 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 678.*]

[Stephen Timms]

If one reads a commitment or a promise in a manifesto for 2015 to 2020, one is entitled to believe that what that says will be achieved will actually be achieved by 2020. The commitment was more explicit than that, because during one of the televised election debates, David Cameron—some of us still remember him—said:

“The gap between the disabled unemployment rate and the unemployment rate for the whole country is still too big. I want to see that cut in half over the next five years.”

He was explicit about that. The press release issued by the hon. Member for North Swindon—he told us that he could not remember it—was also clear that this was going to be done by 2020. That was what everyone in the disability organisations understood.

A month or so ago, I attended the launch, which was hosted by the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), of the National Autistic Society document “The autism employment gap”. Let me read what it says:

“The UK Government has made a very welcome pledge to halve the disability employment gap by the end of this Parliament, meaning they have to shift the disability employment rate from 47% to 64%.”

Just last week, the all-party group on multiple sclerosis, which is chaired by the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), published the report “Employment that works”, which referred to

“a 2015 general election manifesto commitment by the Conservative Party to halve the disability employment gap by 2020”.

However, when I asked the new Secretary of State about the timing of the commitment, he replied to me on 31 October, when he launched the Green Paper, that it was “premature” to set a date for achieving this goal. At least the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work in her winding-up speech in yesterday’s debate did not claim that there were never was a 2020 target when there clearly was.

To resume progress on reducing the disability employment gap—that reduction was delivered consistently under the new deal from 1998 to 2010—the Government need to resource the process properly, as they promised to do earlier this year. The point of making this cut in ESA was supposed to be that the proceeds would be used for that purpose. The Government simply need to keep the promise that they made to disabled people.

When a clear promise has been made to disabled people, is it really too much to ask that it is delivered? The problem with the Green Paper is not that the ideas in it are bad, as I understand the U-turn of abandoning the Work programme, but while the Government promise to increase the number of disabled employment advisers, that is only back up to the number there were in 2013—it is no more than that. A clear promise was made in the Conservative party manifesto. It was understood right across the disability organisations, so I ask the Minister to tell us that she is determined to keep it.

1.54 pm

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to speak in this debate, but regret—I think that we would all agree about this—that it is so necessary. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) for securing the debate.

As we have just heard, the previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, vowed to halve the disability employment gap. At the end of 2015, the employment rate among those living with a disability stood at 46.7% compared with 80.3% for people not living with a disability. According to the Work and Pensions Committee in March 2016, when it launched its inquiry into the previous Prime Minister’s commitment, halving that gap would require getting an additional 1.2 million disabled people into the workplace. However, plans to reduce the employment and support allowance work-related activity component and the corresponding limited capability for work component in universal credit in April 2017 appear to fly in the face of that worthy target set by the previous Prime Minister.

**Justin Tomlinson:** Does the hon. Lady welcome the fact that in the past three years alone, an extra 590,000 disabled people have gone into work? The employment rate for disabled people is now 48%, which is up 4% from when we first came to power?

**Patricia Gibson:** I welcome all progress in this area, but that does not detract from the commitment made by the previous Prime Minister, which I believe everyone would have supported. Progress is always to be welcomed, but we have not gone far enough and we should still work towards that commitment.

In practical terms, £30 each week will be cut from those with long-term health conditions or disabilities, and as we have repeatedly heard today, this will happen before the work and health programme Green Paper can be considered or implemented. The fact is that reducing sick and disabled people’s financial support to jobseekers’ levels is counter-productive since those in the ESA WRAG will have very low incomes for a long time, because disabled people are much more likely to be out of work for longer. It is extremely important that the Government proceed by using an evidence-based approach, instead of rushing into cuts that will have the opposite outcome from what they and everyone else want.

The Government say that they want to help disabled people into work, but under the limited capability for work element of universal credit, disabled people in work and those looking for work will be negatively affected. Those in work but on low pay will be particularly hard hit. How on earth can that be consistent with the aim of halving the disability employment gap? The truth is that helping disabled people into work means supporting them, and doing so effectively. The proposed measures will push them further and further away from the workplace. Scope claims that a loss of financial support for disabled people will have a detrimental impact on their health and wellbeing, pushing them further away from the workplace. It will also strip away necessary support from those already in work, making it harder for them to retain their place in the world of work.

Some 492,180 disabled people across the UK are reliant—I repeat the word “reliant”, because that is so important—on ESA WRAG. According to the third sector, these people will struggle to live independently and will be pushed further and further into isolation, poverty, hardship and debt. Research by Scope discovered that 49% of disabled people use credit cards or loans to pay for everyday essential items such as clothes or food.



We should spare a thought today for people who are living with conditions such as Parkinson's. We know that those with fluctuating conditions are not well served when they are placed in the WRAG, because the work capability assessment does not and cannot accurately capture the reality of living with such a condition. That means that ESA claimants with Parkinson's will be placed in the impossible and demoralising position of being told they are fit for work or should be getting back to work. They are often placed in the WRAG rather than the more appropriate support group.

**Heidi Allen:** Does the hon. Lady therefore welcome, as I do, the fact that the Government will take a completely fresh look at the whole way in which the work capability assessments are carried out, so that we can put people into the right support group—or not, as the case may be?

**Patricia Gibson:** If any part of the social security system needs a fresh look, that would be my first choice, although there is an embarrassment of riches to choose from. At present, people are not well served by work capability assessments.

We have heard protestations today and in the past that no one who is currently receiving ESA and no one with the most severe disabilities will be affected by the forthcoming changes, but they have been categorically refuted by organisations such as the Scottish Association for Mental Health, which has pointed out that those who are currently receiving ESA may well be affected by the changes if they have been claiming the benefit and move into work before they are well enough. They may also be affected if they need to seek support again. People are likely to be deterred from trying out new jobs if the possible outcome is reduced benefit after a short period of employment.

SAMH's report also points out that 98% of its service users said that their mental health had suffered as a result of welfare reforms. People are already very frightened and worried. Ironically—I want Ministers to reflect on this, because we are trying to build consensus across the House today—the Government's policies are literally making those who are coping with the daily challenges of a disability ill or, at best, less well. How can that make those in the group that is targeted by these measures more work-ready? In fact, such measures will prolong or exacerbate existing health conditions. Protecting the sick and disabled should be above budget savings. If it is not, what does that say about the kind of society that we are trying to create? What does it say about Government priorities?

I know that there is concern about this issue on both sides of the House. I urge the Minister to note what has been said by Action on Hearing Loss, Capability Scotland, Disability Agenda Scotland, Guide Dogs, the Motor Neurone Disease Association, Parkinson's UK and a range of members of the Disability Benefits Consortium, and to do the right thing. I urge the Government to use next week's autumn statement to pause these cuts until appropriate alternative measures to implement the commitment to halve the disability gap have been fully considered, and to do all that they can to secure support for current and future claimants so that sick and disabled people are supported adequately when they are able to work, and also when they are unable to do so.

I urge the Minister to respond positively today, and to remove the shadow that hangs over the lives and futures of too many people throughout the United Kingdom as they fear the future and what the Government appear to be seeking to do. I urge her to do the right thing, and to respond to the debate with compassion and understanding.

2.2 pm

**Ms Margaret Ritchie** (South Down) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on initiating the debate. He has a certain credibility, as he has already raised this issue in the Chamber on several occasions. I welcome the cross-party nature of both the motion and the speeches that we have heard so far. We want to see a Government who care: a Government who protect society, but also protect those who are disabled and vulnerable.

I shall make my speech in a Northern Ireland context. As was mentioned earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan), my colleagues in the Social Democratic and Labour party and I voted against the Welfare Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 2015 and the Bill that became the Northern Ireland (Welfare Reform) Act 2015 in the House of Commons less than a year ago. Those measures were dealt with in the House because the ruling parties in the Northern Ireland Executive, Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist party, voted for a legislative consent motion that locked Northern Ireland into the

“welfare clauses of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill as initially introduced at Westminster”.

That is directly relevant to today's debate.

The clauses in question covered the insidious £29.05 a week cut in the ESA WRAG component and the corresponding cut in universal credit. Under the previous Chancellor and the previous Work and Pensions Secretary, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), the Government justified the cut by claiming that it would encourage claimants into work by removing financial disincentives.

I have two issues with that. First, there was the thinly veiled suggestion that members of the ESA WRAG needed financial strain to push them into employment. I know many people in that category, some of whom are constituents and some of whom are related to me. The vast majority are actively seeking work and desperate for the independence and fulfilment that a meaningful job can offer. In my previous role as a Northern Ireland Minister dealing with these matters some seven years ago, I came into contact with people in that position. I knew that they desired work because it would give them status, identity and a purpose in life. The barrier that prevents such people from securing employment has been created by the lack of special adjustments and support in the workplace and by discrimination on the part of some employers, not by the absence of a work ethic.

Secondly, not one shred of evidence has been produced, by the Government or by others, to suggest that £29.05 a week in addition to the basic amount acts as a disincentive. Will the Minister please tell us whether she has any evidence to present to the House, or whether she is endorsing the former Chancellor and his predecessor at the suggestion of the Department for Work and Pensions?

[Ms Margaret Ritchie]

Moreover, in a wider context, we should remember that the original taper in universal credit has been gradually eroded, which has reduced the financial gap between benefits and earnings from employment. Universal credit was intended to prevent claimants' income from dropping sharply as they moved into work, but the cliff is gradually re-emerging as more and more cuts are packaged into it.

The proposed cuts in social security offices in Northern Ireland will lead to their closure, and in my constituency and that of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that will remove access from the most vulnerable people, who are periodically unemployed because of their disability. Running in parallel with these proposed cuts is a lack of accessibility to immediate help.

We should remember that the freeze in benefits is itself the biggest cut in the welfare bill. It may not attract the same criticism as blunter cuts, but it has a very real impact on claimants' living standards. Although the additional amount that the support group receives—currently £36.20 a week—is not subject to a freeze, the basic amount of ESA is. People in the work-related activity group are not just losing nearly £30 a week; they are losing even more from their basic amount, and members of the support group will also suffer a reduction in their overall amount in real terms. This is a slow and creeping means of reducing living standards and piling financial strain on all our constituents with complex health conditions and disabilities who will apply for ESA.

As we approach the week of the autumn statement, I urge the Chancellor—who is not in the Chamber today—to rethink these potential cuts and to reflect on the cross-party nature of the motion, which asks for the autumn statement to provide a pause. We want to develop a society that protects and safeguards those with disabilities, whether they are physical or psychiatric, because the one thing that they desire most in this life is the status and purpose of a job to get up for every day.

2.9 pm

**Natalie McGarry** (Glasgow East) (Ind): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie). I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on securing the debate. It is notable that members of nine parties supported the motion, to which I was pleased to add my name.

It is incredibly disheartening—actually, heart-breaking—that we are having a debate on cuts to support for disabled people in 2016. This should be an issue of consensus in this House, but it has not always been. In a debate on the disability employment gap in June, the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), said:

“There have been times in the past when the House has sought to speak with one voice, and no more so than in the area of disability.”—[*Official Report*, 8 June 2016; Vol. 611, c. 1265.]

Sometimes, when we have discussed support for disabled people, it has been felt that the Opposition and some of the Government's own Back-Benchers, alongside civil society, speak a different language from that of the

Government. I hope today that the motion serves as an interpreter and we can understand each other and act in concert.

Since the UK Government announced their plans to cut ESA by £30 a week—which will reduce the budgets of the sick and disabled by one third—MPs of all stripes have stood repeatedly and railed against it, and charities have unanimously condemned it, but this Government have so far chosen not to listen. Let us hope today, with so much support in the House, that changes.

We already know that many people who are currently unfit for work are dubiously placed in the ESA work-related activity group and that DWP policies already force WRAG claimants to meet arduous bureaucratic requirements simply to receive the financial support they rely on and deserve. We already know that the UK Government's welfare reform programme is impacting disproportionately on those living with disabilities and sicknesses and that it impairs their ability to work. We also already know that there is currently absolutely no evidence that these policies of cuts will have a positive impact on moving those in the WRAG group into work. There is no evidence from the Government, despite repeated requests for it to be produced. It is therefore absolutely imperative that the Government pause the implementation of the cuts.

The former Chancellor of the Exchequer, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), proposed these changes with the aim of ending what he called “the perverse incentives” that “otherwise discourage claimants from taking steps back to work”.

But this is a different time, a different era, a different Government. The extra £30 a week for ESA recipients is not a luxury above and beyond jobseeker's allowance; it was intended—and should remain—for the additional costs associated with their condition.

Only last week a UN inquiry found that there had been “grave and systematic violations” of disabled people's rights under the Government's welfare reforms. On page 6, the report recommends that social protection systems should address the costs associated with disability. I implore Ministers to read it and act.

Ministers have stood at the Dispatch Box to say that they are forced to make “difficult decisions”, but it is not they who bear the brunt of those difficult decisions. It is the Davys mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin): genuine, ambitious, decent folk trapped by illness or disability. But the unfortunate truth is that the Davys of this world are not the exception. Every Member has a Davy and constituents who will be affected.

We must ask ourselves why the Government choose to cut £30 a week from ESA, choose to close Remploy, choose to cut disability employment advisers by 60%, choose to abolish the independent living fund, choose to replace disability living allowance with a far more restrictive PIP assessment criteria and choose to remove Motability from 90,000 disabled people. None of those decisions demonstrates the laudable ambition to cut the disability employment gap in half.

I want this Government to champion social mobility, not contribute to social stagnation and isolation. I want the Government to offer people with disabilities a helping hand, not to kick away their ladder. Today, they have a

chance to do that. My constituency, Glasgow East, has a higher than average level of disability, born or acquired. Most people I speak to tell me, if they are able, they want to work. They want support into work. They want to use their considerable talents to contribute to society. They do not want to be objects of pity or to have to constantly fight for dignity.

According to a survey conducted and released last year by the Disability Benefits Consortium, almost one third of people currently on ESA say they cannot afford to eat on the ESA they receive. I know that there are honourable and decent Members on the Government Benches, and I know that it is not Government policy to starve those people into work, so today they can ensure that that is not the unintended consequence of these cuts. If there was ever an opportunity to ditch this punitive aspect of welfare reform, it is now. We have a new Government, a new Prime Minister and a new Secretary of State: this is the time to assert who we are as a society and who they are as a Government. If the Prime Minister wants truly to live up to the spirit and the letter of her words spoken on the steps of Downing Street, when she pledged to build a country that works for all and promised to fight against burning injustice, the Government would scrap their cuts to ESA today. Otherwise, it is a case of “Meet the new boss, same as the old boss,” and, for that, she will not be forgiven.

2.15 pm

**Christina Rees** (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to speak in this timely debate about a very serious and concerning matter, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on securing the debate.

The welfare state has been the jewel in the crown of British politics for over 70 years. The concept was brought to life by a number of Liberal reforms during the first two decades of the 20th century and has been improved upon and matured by successive Labour Governments, starting with Clement Attlee’s Administration following the 1945 general election. The central principle that led to those Acts of Parliament was the delivery of social security—a safety net of the state, there to catch people who are down on their luck and who have experienced trauma in their lives, whether that be illness, accident or unemployment. This right to social security was then enshrined in article 22 of the universal declaration of human rights in 1948. The notion of social security and welfare is not one that the Labour party wishes to monopolise, and we must recognise the symbolic importance of the fact that many aspects of the welfare state have been retained during the tenure of every Government since 1945.

This Conservative Government seem determined to do everything they can to undermine this social contract and undo 70 years of work. Under the guise of austerity, the Tories have taken through the biggest cuts to welfare for 100 years, and since 2010 we have seen an assault on benefits for disabled people, working people and single parents, among others.

The proposed cuts to ESA and universal credit are yet another act to deliberately hurt the working class. The Resolution Foundation has undertaken research that suggests that cuts to universal credit will leave 2.5 million working families, on average, £2,100 worse off. It also estimates that by 2021 the poorest 50% of

households will be £375 worse off on average. How can such cuts stand up to the scrutiny of an impact assessment or distributional analysis? They simply cannot, and I urge the Government to honour their word and reintroduce an adequate distributional analysis of their economic approach.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies identifies that the effect of the changes to tax and welfare proposed in the 2015 autumn statement would mean losses 25 times greater for those in the bottom decile than those in the top decile. It also claims that almost 500,000 children will be plunged into absolute poverty by 2020 as a direct result of planned tax and benefit reforms. The Office for Budget Responsibility has confirmed that keeping cuts to the work allowance of universal credit means a £9.6 billion reduction in support for working families over the next five years. That is not quite the

“country that works for everyone”

that the Prime Minister aspires to.

We have already seen the Government backtrack on their cuts to PIP, and we are still to find out how they propose to fill the £4.8 billion black hole of committed spending that it left. The opposition to these cuts is not limited to the Opposition Benches, and we have seen a number of the Government’s own Members voice their concerns, the most important of which was the resignation of the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith)—whose idea universal credit was—because he felt the cuts were going too far. He has most recently called on the Chancellor to cancel the planned tax cuts and to reverse cuts to universal credit.

The concept of an employment and support allowance was based on assessing the difference between those with the hope of recovery and those with a chronic illness. For those people with the aim of becoming well again and returning to work, an amount has been paid on top of what they would have received if they had been on jobseeker’s allowance. This additional amount supports them to undertake work-related activity as a means of transition back to the workplace. There are currently 492,180 disabled people nationally in the employment and support allowance work-related activity group. Should the cuts be implemented, those people will be £30 a week worse off, and equivalent cuts to universal credit will come on top of the £24 billion of support that has already been taken away from disabled people by this Government.

Universal credit was originally designed to ensure work that pays, but cuts to the work allowance will completely undermine that. While I can commend the aim of making work pay, I doubt the ability of universal credit to deliver that. The concept has been flawed from the start, and the Government have been forced to extend its roll-out seven times since March 2013. Cutting the work allowance of universal credit and abolishing the ESA work-related activity benefit will clearly be counterproductive. It is likely to increase the number of long-term unemployed people and penalise sick or disabled people who are trying their best to return to work.

Parkinson’s UK says that,

“the Work Related Activity Group is not comprised of people who are fit and healthy to work. It is made up of people who the Government has found to be currently unable to work due to



[Christina Rees]

illness or disability. It is illogical and medically impossible to incentivise a group of people to recover their health by reducing the amount they have to live on”.

I fully support the notion of full employment, but we must recognise that some people need support and time to return to the workplace following illness or disability. Others will not work at all.

In a modern, progressive, compassionate society—which the United Kingdom claims to be—is it not okay to recognise that some people are unfortunately not in a position to work? Instead, we have a Tory Government with a perverse view that our country is made up of scroungers and shirkers who deliberately avoid work, and that the only way to encourage them back to work is to take away the little support they receive to help them on their road to recovery. I have never met anyone who deliberately chooses not to work and not to reap the benefits that work brings. It is for these reasons that I urge the Government to reconsider their irresponsible and pernicious strategy to make cuts to ESA and universal credit, and carefully to consider the impact this will have on sick and disabled people, whose efforts to deal with the trials of life and return to work should be applauded, not ridiculed.

2.23 pm

**George Kerevan** (East Lothian) (SNP): I join other hon. Members in commending my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) not only for securing the debate but for mobilising such a cross-party coalition. I must also commend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), for making notes and being attentive during the debate. There are many Ministers that we could all name who do not do that. I know that she will not give much ground at the end of today’s debate, but I hope that she will take away the feeling of the House on this matter and acknowledge the cross-party view that we should delay the implementation of the cuts to the work-related activity component of the employment and support allowance, at least until we have seen the outcome of the Green Paper.

Interestingly, the underlying reason for a delay has been given to us by the Government themselves. They have implicitly admitted that there is something wrong with the disability payments system for those seeking to get into work. They are looking at the matter again, and we know that the Green Paper consultation period will finish in February. There will then be discussions, and the Government will come back with something after that. All this could take a year or perhaps slightly longer, and we might not see any resolution before the autumn statement of 2017 or possibly in the Budget of 2018. So why change the system now? Why give the civil service more difficulties by changing it now and having to change it again in a year or 18 months’ time? The Government have given us the rationale for a delay.

**Mr Burrowes:** The hon. Gentleman has talked about timing. I want to be more optimistic and give the Government an opportunity here. They are already responding to suggestions about an integrated approach in the Green Paper. We heard announcements yesterday relating to mental health and to homeless jobseekers facing sanctions. I hope that we can look forward to

more announcements before April that will mean that we do not need to pause. Let us remain hopeful that we do not have to wait until April for the vision of the Green Paper to come to fruition.

**George Kerevan:** I am happy to accept that optimistic approach. The hon. Gentleman will possibly have more influence on the Government than I will, and the sooner that happens, the better. In the spirit of this debate, I am trying to be as reasonable as possible in giving the Minister information to take back to the Government.

The most frightening statistic that I have read in recent months relates to the rise in the number of people with disabilities in the adult workforce. The figure is something like 400,000 since 2013, so this is not a diminishing issue; it is a social problem that is rising. I suspect that an awful lot, if not the majority, of those citizens with disabilities are suffering from mental health issues. That is precisely the group that comes in and out of employment. It is the strategic group for which we have to craft a benefits system that will help them through the process and give them the support and encouragement they need to get back into work permanently. This is not just another component of the welfare system; it is a key component for dealing with a growing problem, so again we have to ask the Government to look at the issue and not just to make short-term changes. They need to get the Green Paper through and find a permanent solution.

**Justin Tomlinson:** The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point. He is right to highlight the fact that 50% of the people who go through ESA will have a mental health condition. We should recognise the fact that society is getting better at recognising those with disabilities, which is why we are seeing an increase in the numbers. We also have an ageing population, and 81% of disabilities are related to age.

**George Kerevan:** I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman, who made an impassioned and elegant speech earlier. Indeed, I am happy to commend the former Prime Minister, who made an impassioned effort to direct the Government to deal with mental health issues. In the light of that, let us not rush into tinkering with the ESA work-related activity component. Let us leave aside these short-term changes until we get a permanent solution on which we can all agree.

The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), who is no longer in his place, spoke earlier in the debate. Like me, he represents a constituency in which the full-service roll-out of universal credit has begun. It began in my constituency in March 2016. One of the problems that would emerge if we were to proceed with the ESA work-related activity component cuts, along with ending the eligibility of new claimants under the universal credit regime after April 2017, is that that would create a two-tier system.

Leaving aside the philosophical issues about universal credit, I just want to point out to the Minister that one of the problems is that the full-service roll-out is not working well. This has become the dominant issue in my postbag, with which my constituency office has to deal. With the best will in the world, Jobcentre Plus staff are trying to tackle the problems with the full-service roll-out, but we have had computer problems including constant software bugs and changes. The inability to adjust to the new system has meant that the citizens

advice bureaux and the libraries, which are run by the local authority, have been deluged with requests for support by people who are trying to readjust to the universal credit system. Given that the roll-out is not going smoothly, any suggestion that we can suddenly reduce ESA WRAG to the JSA level in April and that it will go through smoothly is wrong. I want to put it on the record that those of us—this has nothing to do with party or opposition to the Government—who are dealing with the full service roll-out know that it is not going well. We should not be changing the way the system works until we know that it is working in a positive way.

There is no one in this House who would not want to see more people with disabilities get back into the workplace, but there is a specific local problem. All the statistics show that we are actually as near to full employment as we are ever going to get. The hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) was rather scathing about experts and statistics, but they are all that we have to work with. The latest figures from the November Bank of England inflation report suggest that the jobs market will remain tight over the next three years, so the Government must bear that in mind when considering the prospect of getting large numbers of people with disabilities back into the labour market. If we are to get more people back into work, we will have to work with employers and look much more closely at their response.

If there is any lurking suspicion in Government—I am not saying that there is—that reducing ESA WRAG will force more people back into the labour market, I can tell them that that will not work. If that was ever the approach—I am not saying that it was—not only would it be callous, but it would be ineffective. We have to work with employers to put systems in place to enable and prepare them to take more people with disabilities into the labour market. That is a longer-term problem, which will be not be resolved in April by cutting ESA WRAG.

My final plea to the Minister—she has listened attentively and I thank her for that—is to go back to the Treasury and the DWP and rethink the change. It is only a week until the autumn statement, and those of us with any knowledge about how the Treasury works will know that the midnight oil will be burned this weekend as the final changes are made to whatever will be announced next week. There is still time to rethink these cuts.

2.32 pm

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) for securing this extremely important debate. I want to declare an interest as I worked in learning disability services prior to joining this House and am now chair of the all-party parliamentary group for disability.

Since being elected, I have looked deeply into the effects of the Department for Work and Pensions' assessments, particularly those of people with mental health issues and disabilities. I am sure that many will agree that they are deeply unsuitable. The assessment is inadequate and fails to take a much needed holistic, tailored or specialist approach. We must ensure that we harness people's potential and assess them fairly. I am sad to say that I have met many disabled constituents who have been unfairly treated by the welfare system. Many have been left with depression in addition to their

disabilities. These problems have been compounded. They experience a sense of hopelessness in the face of changes, often feeling that they have little voice. We must give them that voice in this House.

People whose Motability cars were taken away from outside their front doors have been left without independence and been plunged into dependence. Cuts to disabled people's benefits are simply unacceptable. If they were morally or socially acceptable, we would not be having this debate. It is unsurprising that so many in this House, from both sides of the Chamber, feel passionately that we should not be taking much needed money away from the most vulnerable in our society. What is surprising is that the UK Government intend to push forward with the changes, which will have a genuinely detrimental effect on people's lives. I ask the Government to think again.

Make no mistake, a reduction of £1,500 a year in benefits would be absolutely catastrophic for many and will undoubtedly exacerbate poverty among the disabled. It is unacceptable. The Government's assertion that the work-related activity component acts as a disincentive for people to look for work can only be described as a sweeping statement. There is no evidence whatsoever to back up that claim. Does the Minister genuinely believe that disabled people are more likely to get a job if their benefits are cut? Employers' attitudes, a lack of understanding, a lack of training and access to job opportunities, a lack of equality in society—those are the real barriers to employment for the disabled. Statistics show that disabled people are twice as likely to be unemployed, and that is not linked to supports, which are vital to help people to find employment, make adaptations and remain in employment. The costs for disabled people are much higher and we must acknowledge that.

I was pleased to hold a Disability Confident event in my constituency a few months ago. I was able to speak directly to employers to help them to overcome preconceptions and to provide them with information about the support that they can access to employ people with disabilities. I urge MPs across the House to do the same. This month, I am hosting my constituency's small business awards and have developed a specific award for inclusive employers. I want to ensure that I support small businesses that provide jobs, and inclusive jobs in particular.

The APPG for disability, which I have the privilege of chairing, will publish a report in the coming weeks on practical measures showing how Government, business, industry and other organisations can help disabled people into work and halve the employment gap. I specifically ask the Minister to commit to meet our cross-party group and to consider the report, which now has the support of seven parties. With the Minister, I recently spoke at a parliamentary event that brought inspirational Paralympians to Westminster and we championed their achievements. We should build on that.

Let us look at support. Let us look at abilities, not disabilities, and at people's potential and aspirations. Let us look at opportunities for disabled people to start their own business and to overcome hurdles. Let us not lose their skills and value to our economy. Let us turn this debate on its head. We should not be short-sighted and do harm; we should pause these cuts. Let us ensure that the UK is compassionate and a role model in disability support and employment so that others across the world can look up to us in our endeavours.

2.38 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate. I thank the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) for setting the scene so well. Right hon. and hon. Members across the Chamber have made marvellous contributions. I have the pleasure of speaking on behalf of the DUP and am happy to have the same attitude as others on the right way forward.

ESA is a complex, complicated benefit with many different aspects. Like many other MPs, I have a full-time member of staff dedicated to working with people to help to calculate their benefits and fill out the confusing, complicated forms. She works some 37.5 hours a week—sometimes more in her own time—and always has a waiting list of people to see her. That is how it is in my office, and I suspect it is the same in others. On my constituency days, I also take on the benefits problems, while the admin staff in my office handle the day-to-day queries. A lot of our time is spent trying to help people, which is why today's debate is so important to my constituents and to me. I watch the struggles that people go through and wonder how these vulnerable and ill people can go through more.

**Christina Rees:** Further to the point about employing full-time caseworkers to deal with the issues that the hon. Gentleman has just mentioned, the caseworker I employ is passionate about helping my constituents in Neath, but the toll on him is great, and he is under strain. We are passionate about what we do, but the workers in our offices are passionate about what they do, too, and we must give credit to them.

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Lady is right. Our staff are compassionate on behalf of our constituents—in many cases, they themselves are our constituents—and they understand the issues very well. When it comes to explaining ourselves, let us make sure that that point is highlighted.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): This does not only affect our staff. Cuts to legal aid and to organisations such as citizens advice bureaux very often mean that we are picking up issues that really only a lawyer should be dealing with.

**Jim Shannon:** Again, that problem will be replicated across all our constituencies. In my constituency, the citizens advice bureaux have reduced their hours, which means that they have reduced their capability to take on tribunals and appeals. We have probably filled that gap. That responsibility has fallen on the shoulders of people not only in my office, but in the offices of other Members in this House. I thank the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Lady for their contributions, because they have outlined the issues very clearly.

In the summer Budget of 2015, it was announced that the work-related activity component paid to those in the WRAG would be abolished for new claims from April 2017. The equivalent element in universal credit will also be abolished. This means a reduction of £29.05 a week, and aligns the rate of payment with that for those claiming jobseeker's allowance. It is said that existing claimants will not be affected and that there will be

protections for those who move into the WRAG or the universal credit equivalent from the support group. The changes were introduced to

“remove the financial incentives that could otherwise discourage claimants from taking steps back to work.”

As of February 2016, there were some 2.4 million ESA claimants in Great Britain. Of these, 1.5 million were in the support group; some 19% were in the work-related activity group; some 13% were in the assessment phase, awaiting their work capability assessment—how frustrating it must be to wait for that to happen, given the time that it takes—and 3% were in the unknown phase, yet to be allocated to a group. Again, that illustrates the lack of process and the difficulties with time. Many people are in this group. Although the changes apply to new applicants, there will certainly be people that are affected. I understand that the DWP impact assessment says:

“The notional loss to each family is expected to be around £28 a week, which represents around a 10 per cent notional change in net income, presented in 2019/20 prices. Someone moving into work could, by working around 4-5 hours a week at National Living Wage, recoup the notional loss of the Work-Related Activity component or the Limited Capability for Work element.”

Let us focus on what that means. The Government expect those disabled people to find four to five hours' work elsewhere to fill the gap. For a start, the hours might not be there. What if their disability means that they are not able to do it? With respect, it is just incredible that the Government believe that that could happen.

Let us be serious here: the whole point of ESA is that it is for people who are unwell. There seems to be a presumption by the DWP that working the five hours a week to fill the gap is not an issue, when in fact the 200,000 or so people who are in WRAG for mental and behavioural issues may not find it such an easy option. Earlier, a Member referred to those with mental health issues. In Northern Ireland, we have many, many people who have depression and other mental health issues, and who suffer greatly every day. Our 30-year conflict has contributed to those problems.

It is fair to say that whenever a Government do something good, we want to congratulate them. The DWP has stopped the renewals of ESA for those who are long-term sick. I am very pleased about that. Many people with brain injuries or who have children with educational and emotional difficulties have come to my office. The court has appointed people to deal with their money, and yet, until now, those people have had to renew their ESA claim every two years. I wrote to my own Department in Northern Ireland about that matter, and I was very pleased to get a response from the Government through the Department and to hear that they are now doing away with that requirement. It is only right that those for whom the court has made appointees should not have to renew their ESA every two years. It is just silly to ask for that.

As an employer, would I hire someone who may be prevented from being reliable because of their documented illness—someone I could not allow to work with customers owing to such issues? Although I would have sympathy, could I run my office like that? The answer is that I could not, and I doubt that the Government could either, so who will employ these people who are being told, “Just work another five hours to make it up.”



Let me be clear: we are not talking about jobseekers, but about people who have a recorded and supported illness. The rationale, while perhaps understandable in other areas, is ridiculous for those who are in this group. There is a reason they are not simply on JSA, and the Government must recognise that.

The hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) referred to the closure of offices, and we are concerned about that as well. We are fighting that together. The campaign is supported by all the parties at every level—council level, MLA level and MP level. Retaining those offices is important. We also should remember the support from the Disability Benefits Consortium. Mencap in Northern Ireland has asked me to express its concerns as well. I am given to understand that there will be

“new funding for additional support to help claimants return to work”.

That has been clarified as £60 million in 2017-18, rising to £100 million in 2020-21. In addition, the Government have announced an extra £15 million per year in 2017-18 and 2018-19 for the Jobcentre Plus Flexible Support Fund to be set aside specifically for those with limited capability for work. Some £43 million has also been allocated to trial ways of providing specialist support for people with common mental health conditions between 2017-18 and 2019-20. I wish to make this plea to the Minister. When we have those staff in place, please, please can we make sure that they have the training, the ability and the quality to respond, because very often, with great respect, they do not have those skills. As the elected representative of my staff, it is frustrating to have people on the phone telling someone that they do not understand what they are about.

My concern is that the seriousness of the illness is not taken into account. It almost feels as though Government are saying, “Yes, yes, I know you’re feeling a trifle under the weather, but come on, old chap, stiffen that upper lip and move on.” That is not possible for those suffering from muscular skeletal problems—there are almost 100,000 in this group. There is no stiff upper lip for them. There are those who cannot know when they will be well enough to work, but they are told to make up the five hours whenever they can. I am sure that my staff would love me to say, “Do your 37.5 hours whenever you feel like it. You can work from 2 am to 7 am if you like.” However, that would not help me to deal with my constituents, my customers or those who need help. There are few places of employment like that, so why can the Government not outline where those five hours at a time can be found? We could go so far as to say that people would have to work only one hour if they could find an employer willing to pay £29 an hour. “Don’t be absurd,” the Government would say, but that would be as easy to find as an employer who would allow someone to work five hours a week whenever they choose, according to their illness.

Instead of cutting benefits, we should focus on improving support for disabled people who need help and on getting them back into work. I know that the Government have made some concessions, and the unemployment figures this week showed that more people who are disabled are in work. That is good news and a move in the right direction. Let us continue in that way.

The Government need to understand the difference between being ill and being unable to find work. In the past month I have had in my office a former ward sister,

a former construction worker, a business owner and a social worker, all of whom are now on ESA. I know those people well. They do not want to be on ESA. They are not choosing not to work out of laziness. They were earning £500 a week and are now getting £75, so the Government’s inference in this regard is insulting. More importantly, it is based on a false premise that cannot be allowed to stand. I therefore feel that I have to stand with the proposer of the motion and those who have supported it and say that we are against these Government proposals. I know that the Minister is an understanding lady and I look to her to respond compassionately to the issues that we have raised. I hope her response to today’s debate will be positive and constructive. Let us help our people as we should.

2.49 pm

**Dr Eilidh Whiteford** (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): This debate could not be more timely, given that we are a week away from the autumn statement. It speaks volumes that the motion has been supported by Members from nine parties represented in this House. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on his persistence in pursuing this issue and on marshalling such broad cross-party support.

As we have heard, Members on both sides of the House know that it is just not right to cut employment and support allowance for sick and disabled people in the work-related activity group by almost £30 a week. It is just not right to cut the corresponding limited capability for work component for those on universal credit. It is especially not right to press ahead with these punitive cuts, which are due to come into effect for new claimants from next April, when the Government have acknowledged that their efforts to address disability employment have failed to date, and their system of employment support for sick and disabled people of working age has been wholly inadequate.

Earlier this month, the Government finally brought forward their long-awaited Green Paper on the disability employment gap, which I have welcomed and we all hope will initiate comprehensive improvements. We have heard a very different tone from Ministers in recent weeks. There have been serious attempts by senior Ministers to distance themselves from their predecessors, not least with the Prime Minister’s early commitment to a “country that works for everyone”.

They will be judged by their actions, not their words, and that is precisely why we need to hit the pause button on these cuts to ESA and universal credit that will cause hardship and distress to thousands of people who are not fit for work. The exchanges between the hon. Members for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) captured this point succinctly when they said that we need to pause to allow the support infrastructure to catch up.

Ministers know that we in the SNP have been deeply critical of the Government’s willingness to allow the most disadvantaged sick and disabled people to bear the brunt of austerity cuts. We will continue to hold them to account for the adverse consequences of their actions—those consequences are already writ large among sick and disabled people in all our communities and constituencies—but I and my colleagues have also tried to be constructive by offering ideas, solutions and better ways forward. We will continue to do that, because it is in everyone’s interest that we get this right.

[*Dr Eilidh Whiteford*]

We should not forget that when these cuts were first announced, the then Chancellor argued that they were intended to remove “perverse incentives” in the system. That point has been made by several hon. Members today. I hope that the new incumbents in the DWP and the Treasury now recognise that taking away necessary financial support from sick and disabled people who have been assessed as unfit for work does not make them get better any more quickly. Quite the reverse: there is a growing body of evidence that poverty exacerbates illness, hinders recovery, and makes it harder for people with long-term conditions to secure and sustain employment.

As we have heard, what is actually perverse is to reduce the resources available for sick and disabled people that enable them to work. I hope the Government will ditch the prejudices and stereotypes that have fed the poor policy decisions of the past, and will listen not only to disabled people and those who represent them, but to MPs on their own Benches who have expressed severe disquiet about the consequences of these cuts.

I am reluctant to break the consensual tone of this debate, but I must respond to the question that the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) asked my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts about whether he thought that the Scottish Government should plug the gap, using new devolved powers in Scotland. Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman has not stayed for the rest of the debate, but I suspect that he knows as well as I do that both ESA and universal credit are not areas of devolved competence. They are fully reserved, despite my best efforts last year, when I tabled and spoke to amendments to the Scotland Bill that would have devolved all working-age benefits. Obviously, we failed to win the backing of the House for those proposals.

It is a wee bit rich for Members to oppose the devolution of those powers yet to demand that the Scottish Government plug the gap. The Scottish Government have already committed an extra £20 million for disability employment support, but they cannot be expected to plug every hole in the bucket of poor Westminster policy making. The hon. Gentleman should take a long, hard look to his own conscience and perhaps his own voting record.

**Kate Green:** As the hon. Lady will remember, my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) pointed out that the Scottish Government were able to provide additional support in relation to the bedroom tax, so it has such a power regarding reserved benefits. His question was: would they use that power in relation to this cut?

**Dr Whiteford:** I thank the hon. Lady for her point, but she should remember that the Scottish Government’s steps to mitigate the bedroom tax have had to be paid for out of money earmarked for our responsibilities in devolved areas. We need to take a responsible approach to make sure that we get this policy right in the long term. We have committed an extra £20 million. I do not know whether she was one of the 20 Labour MPs who marched through the Lobby like the Tories’ little helpers last year to support the fiscal charter on austerity, but as the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) pointed out earlier, we would not even be having this

discussion if the Labour party had been the effective Opposition it could be. I urge Labour Members to work with all of us on these Benches to stop the austerity that is hurting disabled people, to rise to the occasion, and to be a better and more effective Opposition.

Let me come back to the main point of the debate. I want to highlight a number of reasons why the cuts to ESA WRAG and the universal credit limited capability for work component are harming people and are counterproductive. The first is that ESA should not be considered an equivalent of jobseekers’ allowance. People in the ESA WRAG are assessed as not fit for work, whereas with jobseekers’ allowance, the clue is in the name. However, the key point is that, for the most part, JSA is a short-term benefit. Most claimants come off it in a matter of weeks or months, so it is not designed to support people over long periods. By contrast, ESA is for people with serious health problems and disabilities. It is designed to cover some of the additional costs associated with serious illness and disability, and it recognises the reality that many claimants are likely to be in receipt of the benefit for a longer period—in over half of cases, for more than two years.

In my part of the world, one of the most obvious additional costs is heating for people who are likely to be at home all day, who might not be able to move about so much and who need to keep warm. People on low incomes already spend a huge proportion of their money on essentials such as energy and food. We know from the debt charities referred to earlier that a large proportion of people on ESA are already in debt, running a domestic budget deficit and living from hand to mouth. They have already experienced substantial real-terms cuts to their incomes due to austerity.

Getting by on a low income for a long time is hard. It entrenches poverty among sick and disabled people, who end up using all their savings and eroding their assets over time. Illness and disability also take a heavy financial toll on wider family members, who often find their own earning potential limited because they are providing unpaid care, and who try to support loved ones out of their own limited financial resources.

The Government are quite right to say that the disability employment gap is unacceptable, but they need to recognise that those disabled people who are in work are more likely to be in low-paid jobs and are at higher risk of in-work poverty. They also often move in and out of work more frequently than those who do not have health problems.

Less has been said in the debate about the parts of the motion relating to universal credit. The disabled worker element of working tax credit, which is due to disappear under the shift to universal credit, is the very component that actually makes work pay for many disabled workers. The loss of the limited capability for work element for everyone except those in the support group means that many working disabled people will be around £1,500 a year worse off. That will make it harder for disabled people to sustain employment, and it actively undermines efforts to support sick and disabled people into work.

The Government have pointed out in the past that these cuts will apply only to new claimants, but the reality is that people with serious fluctuating conditions often move in and out of work. That is particularly true of people with persistent and serious mental health

conditions, who make up such a large proportion of the ESA case load. The fluctuations of these and other conditions that change over time are often compounded by fluctuations in the labour market and by the trend towards more temporary, fixed-term employment and zero-hours contracts.

The cuts we are debating actually create significant disincentives for those with fluctuating conditions to move into work, because if they do, they become sick again, and if they try to get back into work too early in their recovery and they relapse, they know they will be back on ESA at a significantly reduced rate. That is punitive and counterproductive.

That is at the heart of why we are calling on the Government to hit the brake on these cuts until they have had time to get their act together on the Green Paper and to come forward with more comprehensive and effective support measures for sick and disabled adults of working age. That has been a consistent refrain from Members this afternoon, who have shared moving testimonies from their constituencies.

Cuts to the already low incomes of sick and disabled people who are not fit for work or who are in precarious, low-paid employment are completely unjustifiable. They will damage the health and wellbeing of ordinary people whose lives are already hard enough because of serious health problems. These cuts will push people into deeper poverty and further away from sustainable employment.

The distress and anger of sick and disabled people can be seen and heard in communities across these islands, and those concerns are articulated clearly in the open letters published today. These people are citizens with rights, citizens with needs and people with a contribution to make. It is time that the Government started listening, and I urge them today to do the right thing.

2.59 pm

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on calling this timely debate. The fact that he has such a degree of support from across the House cannot be overestimated. The speeches we have heard show the House at its absolute best. We are concerned about the plight that so many of our constituents are facing and the impact that this additional cut in support will have on them.

Although my party wants the ESA WRAG cuts to be scrapped completely, we will support this motion calling for a postponement until the Government have been able to analyse the consultation from their Green Paper. The same points have been made a number of times: I think that only one speaker generally supported what the Government are doing, while everyone else set out the reasons why their proposals should not go ahead. The key element is that we have only just had the closing date of the Green Paper consultation. I hope that the Minister accepts these points; she will have support from across the House if she does.

Let me re-emphasise some of the points that I made in yesterday's debate. Half the 13 million people living in poverty are disabled or live with a disabled person. The number of disabled people now living in poverty is 5 million—one in three disabled people. The situation is getting worse after a decade when the problem was in decline. According to research by the Joseph Rowntree

Foundation, the figures that are officially published are an underestimate. Labour Members are concerned that the Government do not seem to recognise the link between disability and poverty. We know from extensive research that disabled people are twice as likely to live in poverty as non-disabled people. Eighty per cent. of that poverty results from the condition or disability that they experience. We have heard moving accounts from Members on both sides of the House, including the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who gave a very eloquent description.

This is happening in the context of what disabled people are already going through; it is not just about social security cuts. The Welfare Reform Act 2012 cut £28 billion from 3.7 million disabled people, and that does not even include the cuts in social care and other health-related public services, such as the number of specialist nurses who might be available for people with a learning disability. I will not say that it is the tip of the iceberg, but it is not the whole story. Yesterday I mentioned research showing that families with a disabled adult or child have been made five times worse off than non-disabled people.

Among a number of measures in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 that the Minister debated extensively with me last year, this is one of the worst. We have already heard about the cut of £1,500 a year affecting nearly half a million disabled people.

**Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): This morning I received an email from a constituent who has lost his ESA and has been put on the assessment rate. He suffers from lymphedema, an extremely painful condition that makes him almost unable to walk. He asked what advice I could give him, because the rate that he is now on means that he has to choose on a weekly basis between turning on the heat and eating. What advice should I give him?

**Debbie Abrahams:** I have a constituent with exactly the same condition, and we are going through exactly the same process with the personal independence payment as well as ESA. It is important that my hon. Friend will be representing her constituent. Sixty per cent. of people are successful in the appeals process. That shows how flawed the system is, does it not?

These are people who have been found not fit for work. There is absolutely no evidence that the cut will incentivise people. In fact, the Government's own research, which was published earlier this year, and the Low report say that it is less likely to help disabled people back into work.

Macmillan Cancer Support has forwarded me details about a woman called Lynn, who said

"When I was ill, I had to give up work for a year. I couldn't work—the chemotherapy knocked me for six and I just wanted to sleep all day. It was horrendous. I couldn't pay my mortgage, my council tax. I thought I was going to lose my house. Then I got Employment Support Allowance. If they cut the ESA that would just be absolutely horrendous. I would hate to have had that done to me. Without it, we would have been homeless."

Members across the House will have similar examples.

I again remind the Minister that the Government's own data, which were published last year, show how vulnerable people in the group are. They are twice as likely to die as the population as a whole. That proves that incapacity benefit and ESA are good population



[Debbie Abrahams]

health indicators. We hear awful language about shirkers and scroungers, but these are sick people who deserve care and support, not humiliation.

I mentioned the work, health and disability Green Paper at the beginning of my contribution. It is out for consultation, and while it seems to include some good measures, I have a number of concerns about it. I am also concerned about the reduction in employment support from £700 million to £130 million. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) said, how on earth will we reduce the disability employment gap with such reductions? The Access to Work programme is inadequate: it serves only 35,000 of the 1.4 million disabled people who are fit and able to work. It is nonsense.

I know that we are pressed for time, but I want to touch on the limited capability to work component of universal credit. It has been suggested that it applies only to new claimants, but everybody will transfer to UC at some stage, so it will affect absolutely everyone.

I also want to reflect on growing evidence of the effects that the current round of cuts are already having on sick and disabled people. They include isolation, loss of independence, reliance on food banks, homelessness, exacerbation of existing conditions and a direct link to mental health issues. They have also been associated with the deaths of claimants. It is absolutely unacceptable for policies of the state to be doing such harm, so we support the motion and call for the ESA cuts to be paused. There is a lot of support for that.

In conclusion, there is an evidence base of the effects that the cuts are having on sick and disabled people. Over the same period that the Government have cut support for them, they have given generous support to high earners and big business. Last year, the average worker's pay of £27,645 increased by 2%, while pay for top executives on £5 million increased by 50%. The trend is getting worse and the inequalities are already being felt. We cannot underestimate the effect of those inequalities. They are not inevitable; this is about political choices. The cuts must not go ahead and we would welcome the Government moving on the issue.

3.9 pm

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt):** I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) and the Backbench Business Committee on securing this debate, and all Members on the tone in which it has been conducted. Even the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) has managed to restrain herself today, and we are grateful for that. On these important issues, the House is often at its best when it takes this tone, and on this issue, for all the reasons outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), it is important that we have done so.

Good policy cannot be created in a vacuum; we must think about how something will be delivered, how it will work in practice and how it will affect those concerned. As the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) said, the welfare state is a safety net, but if it works well, it should also be focused on helping someone's future ambitions as well as their basic needs. Proof that we have listened and understood will be in our actions, and a

person's experience of the system and the support they receive is the only thing that will ensure confidence in that system. So we must deliver and we must deliver well.

We must understand the personal impact of a policy on a person, often someone in a complex situation, under considerable strain and challenge. I refer to the budgeting challenge for those who have suddenly had to stop work or who have lost employment because of their condition or ill health, or who are facing increased costs—or both; the challenge of preparing for employment, while focusing on recovery; the challenge as those new constraints restrict a person's choices and flexibility just at a time when such flexibility becomes an imperative; the challenges faced by people who, as well as having their own issues to deal with, often have other responsibilities and priorities—carers, parents or people who are both. Even where recovery or the all-clear is achieved, these people will still have concerns about their illness reoccurring, their ongoing relationship with their employer and the possibility of having to go through it all again.

We must ensure a person's liquidity is in place, so that they can afford the additional costs brought by looking for work, or by being poorly or disabled: higher energy bills; mobile and internet access costs; the cost of getting insurance; the cost of a special diet, in some cases; the extra travel costs that come with unpredictable itineraries; clothing and bedding costs; and the cost of specialised equipment—to name just some of those costs. Someone with a neurological condition will spend almost £200 a week on costs related to their disability. Someone with a physical impairment will spend nearly £300 a week.

When that security and liquidity goes, often so, too, does a person's dignity and wellbeing. They may face the embarrassment of having to pay for a train fare with a pot of 2p coins because that is all the cash they have left; the stress of having no mobile phone credit; the strain of extra planning and budgeting; the knock-on effects of all that to an already stressful situation; and the pressure of not wanting their kids to be disadvantaged or to miss out on what others are doing or what they used to do—or of not wanting that for their grandkids, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North East mentioned.

Although I can answer the question from the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) about benefit levels having a significantly negative association in terms of employment by waving a report by Barr et al. at her,<sup>9j</sup> I will not be relying on those arguments in my speech. I say that because of the obvious point, and one made by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), that someone is more likely to get into work, make a success of it and recover from ill health if they are able to devote themselves to that. If a person has other worries or concerns, their energy and focus on those objectives will be diluted. Many who find themselves in receipt of universal credit or ESA will already have complex situations to deal with, and the delivery of our services should not add to that.

Yesterday, I outlined in detail how we will deal with those issues, but let me briefly recap. We will use funds to alleviate costs directly related to work, through the flexible support fund. May I just correct my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) as the figure is not £15 million—it is an extra £15 million that we have put in because of these changes, and this is currently standing at £83 million? In addition, we will

have national and local schemes, such as the Jobcentre Plus travelcard, but I am also negotiating deals with third parties to help with expenditure not directly related to employment: broadband costs, phone charges, energy costs and insurance.

We are extending our hardship fund, as per the announcement yesterday, to new groups. That will be new money from Treasury over the next four years with immediate effect. For thoroughness, I will mention personal independence payments, which will help to cover costs for 53% of the people we are concerned about today.

**Stephen Timms:** Will the Minister give way?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am going to make some progress. We offer personal budgeting support for those who are transferring to universal credit. That could include money advice, with a mix of online, telephone and face-to-face support. I am also looking at extending that service and considering what further support I could give.

For the sake of the record, I remind the House that the changes to WRAG due in April next year will not affect those who are already in receipt of ESA and universal credit or the equivalent. Further safeguards mean that they will not lose the extra payment even if they are reassessed after April and placed in the WRAG. I hope that that will reassure the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), whom I cannot see here, and the two constituents that he mentioned yesterday, Dean and Lauren.

**Kate Green:** Will the Minister give way?

**Penny Mordaunt:** Bear with me. In response to the hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell), we aim to protect existing claimants who temporarily leave the benefit—for example, to try out work—and who then return. We will introduce draft regulations in due course to set out the detail. Nor will the change affect anyone whose ability to work is significantly limited by their health condition or disability. They will be in the support group or the universal credit equivalent.

On that point, let me recognise the concerns that have been expressed about the binary nature of the work capability assessment and how someone's fitness to undertake a particular type of work is not an indication of how close to the labour market they might be. We need to take into account several other factors, including their skills, in making that assessment. That is why the Green Paper focuses on the work capability assessment and its reform. I hope that that will be welcomed by all Members, particularly the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who mentioned it.

We have sought to get people to fit the system rather than to be part of a system that recognises the importance of personalised support. Everyone's circumstances will be different, as will their multiple challenges.

**Stephen Timms:** I am grateful to the Minister for giving way on that point on personalised support. We understand that on employment support, she proposes to provide up to £100 million a year. Will she clarify

whether that is in addition to the funding currently being provided through the Work programme, or whether it is a replacement for that?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The amount of money and how we spend it will be directed by, and based on, the needs of people who currently need the support. The situation was very different a few years ago, and it will not be like that. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned Labour's success in this territory, but I gently point out to him that the disability employment gap closed under Labour because unemployment rose. I gently say to him that a consensus on tone has been set this afternoon, and that is important.

I am going to do something unusual and make some asks of this House, although it is usually the other way around. If the Green Paper is to deliver all that it must, we must all play our part, whatever our political hue and on whichever side of the House we sit. All the organisations and experts in our constituencies need to be involved, too, including the patient and peer support groups that we are not currently engaged with, and all the organisations that the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) alluded to in the case of his constituent Simon, who faced a domino effect. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) for alluding to the fact that we have a massive opportunity in the Green Paper, not only in terms of what we do for employers and healthcare, but for our own processes in the DWP.

We have designed the consultation process to facilitate discussion at a very local level, with facilitators' packs and other support, and I ask all MPs to help to facilitate local meetings, bringing together organisations from across their constituencies. That way, we will get a good result from the Green Paper not just in the policies that will come out of it, but in starting local conversations about how it will work. On 5 December, we will hold an event in Parliament, where there will be a pack for every Member and every constituency to facilitate such dialogue.

**Mr Burrows:** I am grateful to the Minister for her constructive response to the debate. All the people and organisations to which she has referred would no doubt want to hear whether the hardship fund, the flexible support fund and the third-party deals she has mentioned will fully compensate for the loss of the WRAG payments for new claimants? Will she give us such a reassurance?

**Penny Mordaunt:** Yes. Let me give my hon. Friend that reassurance. My hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) not only thanked DWP staff again, but helpfully outlined the detail of the support mentioned in the Green Paper, which we will bring in before there are new claimants from April. I am grateful to him for going through that in detail. All that support will be in place before the new claims come in.

I have heard the word "pause" a lot this afternoon. I do not think we should pause that support. We need to progress it, and it will come on stream in April.

**Dr Mathias:** Will the Minister give way?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry, but I do not have any time left.

[Penny Mordaunt]

We must also progress the work of the Green Paper and pick up the pace, because we need to deliver on those issues. Having said that we do not wish to pause the support, I fully understand that we also need to ensure that the support for a person's costs and liquidity—their ability to meet their cost of living—is in place. That is not just the right thing to do, but the smart thing to do if we want those people to be able to concentrate on either getting well or preparing for employment. As well as meeting those needs, we must ensure at the same time that we are taking care of their needs for the future. I have no intention of pausing our proposed support, which will come into effect in April, and I assure the House that the work we are doing—we have made announcements, and we have reiterated them again today—will meet that need. I hope that every Member will help us not only to do both those things, but to deliver on our ambitions in the Green Paper. I hope to see everyone at the event in the House on 5 December.

Finally, if the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) has time after this debate, my officials are waiting to deal with her constituent's case.

3.23 pm

**Neil Gray:** I thank everyone who has taken part in this debate. There have been some wonderful speeches on both sides of the House calling on the Government to press pause on these cuts. The vast majority of the more than 20 Back-Bench speakers have supported the premise of the motion. I do not want to single out any Member, but all the contributions have come together to send a very clear message to the Government about what the House thinks on these matters.

I hope that the debate has given the Government cause to think again, including about how to pause the cuts at least until a new and appropriate form of disability employment support can be considered and put in place. The debate has been about building a constructive case for the Government to consider: it has been cross-party, well-tempered and, above all, an appeal. In that spirit, I wrote to the Chancellor last week offering to meet him ahead of the autumn statement to discuss how to stop the cuts happening before a replacement is considered. I reiterate that message and that offer, which is genuinely made, to Work and Pensions Ministers.

This issue is too important and the need for action is too urgent for us to retreat into party trenches. The Government must work on the same basis as that on which this debate has been conducted to deliver for and meet the needs of people such as John Clarke.

*Question put.*

*The House divided: Ayes 127, Noes 0.*

**Division No. 84]**

**[3.25 pm**

**AYES**

Abrahams, Debbie	Black, Mhairi
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina	Blenkinsop, Tom
Allen, Heidi	Blomfield, Paul
Arkless, Richard	Boswell, Philip
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Benn, rh Hilary	Brake, rh Tom
Betts, Mr Clive	Brock, Deidre

Brown, Alan	Law, Chris
Brown, Lyn	Lefroy, Jeremy
Buck, Ms Karen	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Burrowes, Mr David	Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Mann, John
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Marris, Rob
Cherry, Joanna	Maskell, Rachael
Clwyd, rh Ann	Mathias, Dr Tania
Cooper, Rosie	McCarthy, Kerry
Coyle, Neil	McDonald, Andy
Creagh, Mary	McDonald, Stuart C.
Cummins, Judith	McDonnell, rh John
Cunningham, Alex	McGarry, Natalie
Cunningham, Mr Jim	McLaughlin, Anne
Dakin, Nic	McMahon, Jim
Danczuk, Simon	Meale, Sir Alan
David, Wayne	Mearns, Ian
Davies, Geraint	Monaghan, Dr Paul
Debonnaire, Thangam	Morden, Jessica
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Mullin, Roger
Donaldson, Stuart Blair	Newlands, Gavin
Durkan, Mark	O'Hara, Brendan
Eagle, Ms Angela	Onn, Melanie
Ellman, Mrs Louise	Owen, Albert
Elmore, Chris	Paterson, Steven
Esterson, Bill	Phillips, Jess
Ferrier, Margaret	Pound, Stephen
Fitzpatrick, Jim	Rayner, Angela
Fletcher, Colleen	Rees, Christina
Foxcroft, Vicky	Reynolds, Jonathan
Furniss, Gill	Rotheram, Steve
Gapes, Mike	Salmond, rh Alex
Gibson, Patricia	Shannon, Jim
Glendon, Mary	Sherriff, Paula
Goodman, Helen	Skinner, Mr Dennis
Grady, Patrick	Smith, Jeff
Grant, Peter	Smith, Nick
Green, Kate	Smyth, Karin
Greenwood, Margaret	Starmer, Keir
Gwynne, Andrew	Stephens, Chris
Harris, Carolyn	Tami, Mark
Hayes, Helen	Thewliss, Alison
Healey, rh John	Thomas, Mr Gareth
Hendry, Drew	Timms, rh Stephen
Hillier, Meg	Turley, Anna
Hollern, Kate	Twigg, Stephen
Hollobone, Mr Philip	West, Catherine
Hopkins, Kelvin	Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Howarth, rh Mr George	Whitehead, Dr Alan
Hunt, Tristram	Williams, Hywel
Huq, Dr Rupa	Williams, Mr Mark
Johnson, Diana	Wilson, Corri
Jones, Gerald	Wilson, Phil
Jones, Graham	Winnick, Mr David
Jones, Mr Kevan	
Kerevan, George	
Kinahan, Danny	
Lavery, Ian	

**Tellers for the Ayes:**

**Mike Weir and  
Neil Gray**

**NOES**

**Tellers for the Noes:**

**Ms Margaret Ritchie and**

**Ian Blackford**

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House notes the Government's plans to reduce the Employment and Support Allowance work-related activity component and the corresponding limited capability for work component in universal credit in April 2017; further notes that this measure will cut the weekly amount received by recipients with long-term



health conditions or disabilities by £30 and that these cuts are due to take place before the promised Work and Health programme Green Paper can be considered or implemented; and therefore calls on the Government to use the upcoming Autumn Statement to postpone the cuts to Employment and Support Allowance work-related activity component and the corresponding limited capability for work component in universal credit until appropriate alternative measures to progress the commitment to halve the disability employment gap have been considered, in order to secure support for current and future claimants so that sick and disabled people are supported adequately when they are unable to work.

## International Men's Day

3.37 pm

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered International Men's Day.

Before I start, may I thank the Backbench Business Committee for finding time for this debate, and particularly for finding a date as close as possible to International Men's Day, which actually falls on Saturday? This was the closest sitting day on which the debate could have been held, so I am very grateful to the Committee.

A few people have said that they cannot be here today. In particular, I said I would pass on the apologies of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), the Chair of the Women and Equalities Select Committee, who wanted to be here, but could not be for reasons beyond her control. I also thank the House of Commons Library, which has put together a fantastic brief for this debate. I urge all right hon. and hon. Members to read it, as it is illuminating on the subject of men's issues. I also want to plug Incommunities, the social housing provider in my constituency, which has been celebrating International Men's Day and last week held a "dads and lads" day at its premises. It was very successful. Finally, I want to thank the many people who have been in touch with me to tell me their story or to put forward their perspective on their life and problems. I am grateful to them for taking the time to do so.

The aims of International Men's Day are admirable. Its objectives are: to promote male role models; to celebrate the contribution that men make; to focus on men's health and wellbeing; to highlight discrimination against men and the inequalities that men and boys face; to improve gender relations and promote gender equality; and to create a safer world for everyone.

The UK theme for the day is "making a difference for men and boys". That covers issues such as the high male suicide rate; the challenges faced by boys and men at all stages of education, including attainment; men's health, particularly shorter life expectancy and workplace deaths; the challenges faced by the most marginalised men and boys in society—homeless men, boys in care and the higher rate of male deaths in custody, for example; male victims of violence, including sexual violence; the challenges faced by men as parents, particularly new fathers and separated fathers; and male victims and survivors of sexual abuse, rape, sexual exploitation, domestic abuse, forced marriage, honour-based crime, stalking and slavery.

I want to put on record the support I received from the Prime Minister, who wrote to me last month to say:

"I recognise the important issues that this event seeks to highlight, including men's health, male suicide rates and the underperformance of boys in school. These are serious matters that must be addressed in a considered way. As I said on the steps of Downing Street on my first day as Prime Minister, one of the challenges we must confront is that white working-class boys are less likely than anyone else in Britain to go to university. I know that you held a debate in Westminster Hall last year on international men's day, and I note that you are hoping to hold a debate in the Commons Chamber this year. Of course, this is not a matter for me as Prime Minister to decide, but I will watch with interest to see if your request is granted."

Let me provide a bit of background. As I said in last year's Westminster Hall debate, I wanted the men's day to be the start of us dealing with some of the forgotten men's issues—and there are plenty of them, far too

[Philip Davies]

many for me to cover in my speech today. I outlined some of the issues at the start, but I will not have time to deal with them all today. For example, I will not have time to mention the underperformance of boys in school or some of the male health issues. One thing we seldom, if ever, hear about in this place is the part-time gender pay gap. I have not heard it noted before, but when it comes to part-time workers, women are paid 6% more than men on average. I shall not have time to concentrate on all those issues, so I shall concentrate on just a few—male suicide, domestic violence, homelessness and injustice for fathers.

There is a very great difference—I fear that the Minister rather got this mixed up at the last questions session—between men raising issues, about which there is clearly no problem either in this House or in the wider world, and the raising of men's issues. That is very different. Although we might get a lot of the former, we seldom get much of the latter, and that is what I want to focus on today.

I shall start with male suicide. According to the Library, in 2012 more than 4,500 men felt they had no choice but to take their own life. In 2013, the figure was nearly 5,000 men, while in 2014—the latest figure for which information appears to be officially available—it was 4,630 men. In fact, over the last 30 years, according to the Office for National Statistics figures, supplied to me by the Library, 134,554 men have taken their own life. The Campaign Against Living Miserably commissioned a poll that found that four in 10 men had considered suicide, with two fifths never talking to anyone about their problems. Half of those who did not seek help did not want people to worry about them; a third felt ashamed; nearly 40% did not want to make a fuss; and 43% did not want to talk about their feelings.

I want to put on record my congratulations to the Health Committee on embarking on its suicide prevention inquiry. It is looking at suicide across the board, but it is clear that this is an issue that affects men much more than women. The figures show that 75% of those who took their own life in 2014 were men and 25% were women.

**Stephen Pound** (Ealing North) (Lab): Although I may not agree with the general thrust of the debate, I think that the hon. Gentleman is making an important point in this respect. May I ask whether he has disaggregated the figures that he has given? In Northern Ireland, for example, more people have committed suicide since 1997 than died in all the 30 years of the troubles, and the vast majority have been men. There were clearly specific issues and reasons behind that epidemic of suicides. Has the hon. Gentleman done any disaggregation to establish whether, for instance, people from former industrial areas who no longer have access to the role model of a miner or shipworker are affected in this way? He is on to something important, and I hope that we do not lose it in the generality of his introduction.

**Philip Davies:** That is a good point. The reasons for these suicides are many and varied. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman contacts CALM, the Campaign Against Living Miserably, which has members who are real experts in this field, and also consults the Library briefing, which is also very illuminating. As he says, many factors are involved when people take their own life, and each one is an individual tragedy.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate, and on the powerful speech that he is making. The House will have been shocked by the figures that he has just revealed. Is he confident that the Department of Health realises that this is a serious public health issue, which urgently needs to be addressed by general practitioners and hospitals up and down the land? That must be one of the main reasons why men are losing their life: it must be one of the main causes of avoidable deaths in this country. That such a large number of people should lose their life in an avoidable way is tragic, regardless of whether they are men or women.

**Philip Davies:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Debates such as this are important because they highlight the problems and urge that more be done, and I also commend the Select Committee for looking into this issue.

I appreciate that the Committee's inquiry is ongoing, but I had a look at some of the evidence that it has received so far. I was struck by, for instance, evidence from the British Transport police relating to the suicides with which they deal. They dealt with 388 fatalities in, I believe, the last year, of which 305 were suspected suicides; 81% were men and 19% were women, but this is not just a gender issue. According to the evidence, 57% of those people had a known mental health history, 22% had been reported missing, 11% had previous convictions—one person had a "suicidal" marker on the police national computer—4% were current in-patients in mental health units, and 2% were absent without leave from mental health units. Wider issues therefore need to be considered, but they are all tragic cases. It is clear that many of the people concerned had a known mental health history, but it is also clear that many did not, and we must not forget those people.

I do not want to pre-empt the Select Committee's inquiry, but one point made in CALM's submission is very pertinent to the debate. It said:

"Despite the evidence that the risk of suicide is disproportionate to men as a whole when compared to women, research is often gender neutral or narrowed beyond gender (e.g. by sexual orientation or age). As a result, there is no specific research carried out on men and societal and environmental factors. Broader, gender specific research could reveal hidden causes of suicide that have not yet been explored. For instance, there could be great benefit in researching the impact of testosterone reducing drugs on the rates of suicide in men, however the current lens of research funding and its gender neutral approach does not provide a platform for such research."

I hope that the Government will take that on board. A message should go out from the House today. If anyone is feeling suicidal, we should say, "Please speak to someone. Don't suffer alone, as too many men often do."

I want people to be in no doubt that there are male victims of domestic violence and abuse, despite what people may think and despite the stereotypes that surround the issue. The notion that in every case of domestic violence or abuse the perpetrator is a big burly wife-beater is just that: a notion. According to a report from the Office for National Statistics, "Focus on Violent Crime and Sexual Offences", which relates to the year ending March 2015 and was released in February of this year,

"The Crime Survey England and Wales estimates that 8.2% of women and 4.0% of men reported experiencing any type of domestic abuse in the last year (that is, partner / ex-partner abuse

(non-sexual), family abuse (non-sexual) and sexual assault or stalking carried out by a current or former partner or other family member). This is equivalent to an estimated 1.3 million female victims and 600,000 male victims.”

It also confirmed that, specifically for partner abuse, 6.5% of women and 2.8% of men reported having experienced any type of partner abuse in the last year, equivalent to an estimated 1.1 million female victims and half a million male victims. The pattern is consistent at all levels of domestic violence. In other words, for every three victims of domestic abuse, two will be female and one will be male.

**Stephen Pound:** I did not want to interrupt the hon. Gentleman's flow because I appreciate that what he is saying is very important, but at the beginning of this section of his peroration he rightly said that any person, male or female, who may feel suicidal, lost or alone should seek help. The Samaritans are available every day of the week, 24 hours a day, and their phone number, 116 123, is one that we should all be familiar with. The Samaritans are there for people in precisely these circumstances, and I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for intruding on his flow.

**Philip Davies:** I do not need to forgive the hon. Gentleman; I welcome his intervention and am grateful for that public service announcement.

According to the ManKind Initiative, 20 organisations offer refuge or safe-house provision for male victims of domestic violence in the UK. There are a total of 82 spaces in the country, of which 24 are dedicated to male domestic violence victims only. For female victims, there are nearly 400 specialist domestic violence organisations providing refuge accommodation for women in the UK, with about 4,000 spaces for over 7,000 women and children. I suspect there are not sufficient spaces for female victims of domestic violence, but if there are 4,000 spaces for female victims of domestic violence, it follows that the 24 dedicated spaces for male victims of domestic violence clearly are not enough, when men make up a third of cases of people who suffer domestic violence.

What about the Government's recent policy announcement to spend another £20 million on providing spaces, not for domestic violence victims generally, but specifically for female victims of domestic violence? The Government must not forget male victims of domestic violence either, and must provide suitable funding for them too, because they are getting forgotten about.

It is worth pointing out that according to the ManKind Initiative, male victims are over twice as likely as women—29% compared with 12% for women—not to tell anyone about the partner abuse they are suffering. Only 10% of male victims will tell the police compared with 26% of women, only 23% will tell a person in an official position compared with 43% of women, and only 11% will tell a health professional compared with 23% of women.

**Mr Hollobone:** My hon. Friend is making a very good point and I am sure the House will recognise that domestic violence against men is probably far more underreported than domestic violence against women, although of course all domestic violence is abhorrent. Another problem for men who have been abused is that all too often they are denied the right to see their children once the relationship breaks up, because the

system is still biased—sometimes for understandable reasons, sometimes not—in favour of the woman, and this compounds the problem for vulnerable men who have been victims.

**Philip Davies:** My hon. Friend is right, and we must not forget fathers in the whole issue of bringing up children. As he says, in some cases it is perfectly right that the father, because of their behaviour, is denied access to the children, but in many cases it is not, and this is a massive problem for many people and is clearly one of the causes of the high suicide rate among men. It is not something that can be swept under the carpet. We must make sure that, where appropriate, fathers are given every assistance to have access to the children.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman will no doubt correct me if I am wrong, but I believe the criteria for deciding who has residence and contact in relation to children is the same in England as in Scotland, and it revolves around the best interests of the child, rather than the parents' interests.

**Philip Davies:** I do not have time to have a philosophical debate—[HON. MEMBERS: “It's a legal debate.”] Well, it is a question of what is considered to be in the best interests of the child, and my point is that children having access to their fathers is in their best interests more often than the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) indicated that the courts sometimes think. Children want access to their fathers, and in many cases they need such access. The whole point of being in this place is that when we think the law is wrong, we can do something about it.

**Joanna Cherry:** Is the hon. Gentleman aware of any empirical research that shows that the legal system in Scotland or England is biased against fathers? I am not aware of any.

**Philip Davies:** The hon. and learned Lady is trying to pretend that there is not an issue. I urge her to read the Library briefing, which she clearly has not done. Perhaps she will do us the courtesy of reading it before she—

**Joanna Cherry** *rose*—

**Philip Davies:** I am not giving way to the hon. and learned Lady again. If she does not think that there is an issue—[*Interruption.*] Does the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) want to participate in the debate?

**Joanna Cherry:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** This had better be a point of order.

**Joanna Cherry:** Is it in order for the hon. Gentleman to suggest that I have not read that briefing? When I asked him whether he was aware of any empirical research to back up an assertion he was making, he instead threw that back on to me and suggested that I had done something wrong. Is that in order?



**Madam Deputy Speaker:** That is not a point of order, as the hon. and learned Lady knows. The hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) has not allowed her to intervene, but she has successfully put her view on record none the less.

**Philip Davies:** I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I did allow the hon. and learned Lady to intervene twice, but it was a shame that in both those interventions, she had nothing to say about looking after the interests of fathers or about the rights of men. Instead, she tried to make this into some kind of gender-bashing exercise, which did her no credit whatever. If she does not think that fathers have problems getting access to their children, sometimes unfairly, all I can suggest is that she gets out more—[*Interruption.*] Perhaps she might get out more in her own constituency.

**Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con):** I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I shall be keen to bring up some issues from my constituency precisely because I have met people at my surgery who find it easier to approach a female MP who will perhaps give them a more empathetic hearing, and who have not felt able to talk to anyone else about the access to their children that they feel is being denied to them.

**Philip Davies** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** Order. I must point out to the hon. Gentleman that he has now been on his feet for 20 minutes, which is the amount of time allowed for opening speeches. I am going to have to put an informal time limit on Back-Bench speeches in order to get everyone in, so I should be grateful if he would come to the end of his remarks.

**Philip Davies:** I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have been trying to take interventions, but I will obviously abide by your ruling. I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) for her intervention.

I shall now canter through a few other issues that I said I would touch on and therefore must. On homelessness, according to St Mungo's, 85% of rough sleepers are men. That is clearly an issue that needs to be addressed. With regard to injustice for fathers, Erin Pizzey, the founder of the first women's refuge in the UK, has said:

"There are a lot of reasons why fathers are not with their children, not least that women won't let them".

When the Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families, my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Edward Timpson), was introducing legislation in 2014, he said—[*Interruption.*] The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West wanted some evidence, but she cannot even be bothered to listen to it now. The Minister said:

"We recognise that the court should already take account of the importance of a child's relationship with both parents, but there is currently no legislative statement to that effect. We want to reinforce by way of statute the expectation that both parents should be involved in a child's life, unless the child is at risk of harm or it is not in the child's best interests."—[*Official Report, Children and Families Public Bill Committee, 14 March 2013; c. 289.*]

The hon. and learned Lady wanted some evidence; there it is.

One of the aims of International Men's Day is to improve gender relations, which I absolutely support. As I have said before, I want to be very clear that I do not believe there is an issue between men and women. I would actually rather we did not have to be here having this debate, and that we did not have separate international women's and men's days. The problem has been stirred up by politically correct people who want to make it a war on gender. In so many ways, considering men and women separately as though they lived in complete isolation is absolutely ridiculous. Neither group is isolated. Both sexes have mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, uncles and aunts, grandmothers and grandfathers, sons and daughters, husbands and wives, and boyfriends and girlfriends. Every woman has related male parties and therefore a vested interest in men's issues. That is an unavoidable fact. Some issues affect men alone or more than women and vice versa, but both men and women have an interest in such issues and in working together without politically correct gender splits. If we were able to do that in this House, that would be much better.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** I have just done a quick calculation and if everybody, including the Front-Bench speakers, takes about eight minutes, we will get everybody in. If anybody speaks for much longer than that, we will have to start cutting the limit, but if we stick to eight minutes, that should be fine.

4.1 pm

**Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab):** I certainly will not take eight minutes, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on securing this debate on International Men's Day. I recognise some of the important issues that the day seeks to highlight, particularly in relation to men's mental health and wellbeing and tackling male suicide, which is the event's chosen theme for 2016.

In truth, there is scarcely a more pertinent theme than "Stop Male Suicide". The stark statistics highlight worrying trends and a growing crisis. It is worth taking a few moments to examine the shocking nature of just two of the headline statistics: suicide is the largest cause of death of men under 45; and the suicide rate for men is three times higher than that for women. Why is suicide becoming a highly gendered occurrence? The answer, in part, relates to how men are brought up to act and the roles, traits and behaviours that society expects of them. From an early age, boys are often subjected to pernicious masculine conditioning that demands that, rather than talk about their emotions and how they feel in times of difficulty or crisis, they should "man up". They are told, "Boys don't cry, do they?"

By adulthood those underlying societal expectations are so ingrained that for a man to show any sign of perceived weakness is viewed as a social taboo. Men's reluctance to seek help and support when distressed adds to their vulnerability, with many instead preferring simply to bury their head in the sand or turn to drink or drugs despite the damaging effects on employment, personal finances, and relationships, and the social isolation, low self-esteem and homelessness, all of which are known to be common triggers associated with suicide. The inescapable truth is that if we are ever to tackle the high male suicide rate, we need to encourage men to start to talk about how they feel.

In Coventry, that encouragement and those conversations are being initiated by a new mental health awareness and suicide prevention campaign called “It Takes Balls to Talk”. The campaign is the brainchild of Alex Cotton, a mental health nurse and one of my constituents, and was launched last month. It is a public information programme targeted at male-dominated sporting venues across Coventry and Warwickshire and uses sporting themes to raise awareness of mental health support services. It seeks to reduce male suicide by encouraging men to talk about their feelings, and it aims to help men to understand that it is important not to keep their feelings to themselves, and to direct them to help and support, when they need it, in order to promote positive mental health.

“It Takes Balls to Talk” recognises how societal expectations have shaped men’s behaviour in how they deal with or, more accurately, fail to deal with their emotions, feelings and wellbeing. It plays a vital role in breaking down the barriers that prevent men from positively engaging with mental health services in the local area. This is of paramount importance as research shows that up to 85% of men who take their own life have not been reached by current public health messages and have never been known to mental health services. That statistic alone shows the importance that targeted initiatives such as “It Takes Balls to Talk” could make in changing the country’s appallingly high male suicide rates. After all, is that not what we are all striving for? We all want to see an end to a national tragedy that can be counted in the thousands of lives that are lost each year through suicide. We all have a shared responsibility to act, tackle this issue head on and ensure that no more fathers, sons, brothers or friends are stolen from us needlessly.

4.5 pm

**Sir Paul Beresford** (Mole Valley) (Con): I join in the thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) for launching this topic on what is probably an unsuspecting House.

Having recently had a small brush with the Committee on Standards in Public Life, I must declare some interests. One thing I will touch on relates to dentistry, and I still practise a tiny bit of dentistry. Then there is the obvious one: I am a male and a father of three sons, so I have a considerable interest in this particular subject. Even my wife says that I am overly interested in it.

My original thoughts on this topic are derived from a cover story in that highly respected weekly journal, *The Economist*. Its cover story, at the end of May last year, was entitled “The Weaker Sex”. As many members of the fairer sex, particularly my wife, my sister, my daughter and my daughters-in-law, point out, a superficial first glance would suggest that males’ domination of cultural and political life is secure. More than 90% of Presidents and Prime Ministers are male, as are nearly all big corporate bosses. Men appear to dominate finance, technology, films, sports and music. With that said, there is still plenty of cause for concern. Men tend to find themselves either at the very top or at the very bottom of our systems. They are far more likely than women to be jailed; more likely to be estranged from their children; and, as we have heard, very much more likely to commit suicide. Men earn fewer university degrees than women. Boys in the developed world are 50% more likely to fail maths, reading and science entirely.

Then we have the little issue of the human papilloma virus. Girls are vaccinated against it—this is to stop cervical cancer. It is unlikely that men will get cervical cancer, but they do get penile cancer. From my point of view as a dentist, roughly 40% of head and neck cancers are caused by the virus. More men get head and neck cancer than women, so why are we not vaccinating boys as well as girls? It is long overdue. The Australians do it; and if the Australians are doing it, we have just got to do it. These trends are particularly apparent in working-class men living in developed countries who have struggled to adapt to a hugely changed world and to the increasing changes to the job market in the past 50 years. The ever increasing power of technology and the ability to import more from abroad has seen a steep decline in the need for traditional muscle-based work in the United Kingdom.

By sharp contrast, women are becoming a majority in key areas such as healthcare and education. They are helped by their superior skills, which they gain because they respond better to education. As education has become more important, boys have fallen behind girls in school. The latest shock is in the theatre. The role of King Lear has been played by many male greats such as John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier and Donald Sinden, whom I knew so well, and many other superior male actors. Now that male role has been taken by our former colleague, or comrade, Glenda Jackson. Christopher Biggins’ *Widow Twankey* does not quite match that!

The way that males are becoming the weaker sex is seriously worrying. It is even happening in the Antipodes. In 25 years’ time, there is a possibility that the New Zealand women’s rugby team will beat the All Blacks—actually, realistically, that is probably a haka too far.

The article in *The Economist* that I mentioned says:

“Men who lose jobs in manufacturing often never work again. And men without work find it hard to attract a permanent mate. The result, for low-skilled men, is a poisonous combination of no job, no family and no prospects.”

The political consensus has been that economics is to blame for this situation. The argument goes that shrinking job opportunities for men are entrenching poverty and destroying families. In America, pay for men with only a high school certificate fell by 21% in real terms between 1979 and 2013; for women with similar qualifications, it rose—only by 3%, but it rose. Around a fifth of working-age American men with only a high school diploma have no job.

Part of the solution lies in a change in cultural attitudes, as the hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) mentioned. Over the past generation, middle-class men have learned that they need to help with childcare, and they have changed their behaviour, but, sadly, it appears from the *Economist* article and others that working-class men need to catch up. Women have learned that they can be doctors, dentists, surgeons, opticians, engineers and physicists without losing their femininity. Men need to understand that traditional manual jobs are not coming back, but that they can be nurses, hairdressers, waiters or—this is vital—primary school teachers. I visited a primary school today which has a totally female staff except for one male teacher. The headmistress spoke about the vital importance of a male role model in the school, which is missing from many other schools.

[Sir Paul Beresford]

The most important focus must be reform of the education system, which is essentially still based in a pre-digital era where most male jobs were, as I said, muscle-based. We as politicians need to recognise that boys' underachievement is a serious problem, and we need to sort it out now. Some sensible policies that are good for everybody are particularly good for boys. Early childhood education provides boys with more structure and a better chance of developing verbal and social skills. Countries with successful vocational systems, such as Germany, have done a better job than we have here in the UK. We need to reinvent vocational education for an age when trainees are more likely to get jobs in hospitals, IT or teaching than in factories.

The growing equality of the sexes is one of the biggest achievements of the post-war era: people have greater opportunities than ever before to achieve their ambitions, regardless of their gender. We have to accept that many men fail to cope in this world. When it comes to health, men really are the weaker sex. They are more likely to get cancer than women and are also more likely to die from it. They are more likely to suffer from heart disease, stroke and obesity. When it comes to happiness, women again appear to have the upper hand, to judge from the suicide rates. Experts know that men are particularly bad at seeking medical help, even when they need it. Men are still dying younger. In England and Wales, 42% of men die before their 75th birthday. The corresponding figure is 26% for women. I think about this every time I struggle to open a door for a lady.

It is very easy and tempting to blame men for the current position and to be fatalistic about it, but that is not the way forward. To put an absolute number on it, almost 100,000 men—enough to fill all the British Army's full-time posts—are dying prematurely each year, compared with 66,000 women. Much of this is self-inflicted. As a group, men out-drink and out-smoke women. Men are also more likely to end their life violently in a car accident or, as has been mentioned, by suicide. Interestingly, the rates of suicide attempts do not differ between men and women; men are just better at it.

It is generally accepted that men are very bad at seeking help. Men visit the GP less because the health system is not working for them. It is not male-friendly. Could it be that aspects of our society have turned so far towards women that they are now against men?

**Richard Arkless** (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Despite the obvious sense of many of the contributions, I feel slightly uncomfortable with the subject of this debate. Although I recognise differentials in terms of suicide, the number of primary school teachers and perhaps even fathers' residence rights, it is not women who caused misogyny, it is not women who caused the pay gap, and it is certainly not women who deprived women of the vote. Should we not be working towards equality, or am I just a man who cannot cry, or a feminist? I am not quite sure.

**Sir Paul Beresford** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker** (Natascha Engel): Order. I just remind the hon. Gentleman that we have an informal limit of eight minutes. Nothing has been imposed, but he

has been speaking for almost 10 minutes now, so if he could start coming to a conclusion, I would be very grateful.

**Sir Paul Beresford**: I think I will probably be one of the last men—certainly in my area and my family—to be called a misogynist. We are failing men; that is the point.

We have the Women and Equalities Committee, and I am sorry the Chairwoman is not here, but perhaps, under the equalities section of its remit, it could look into the issue of where we are failing men.

4.15 pm

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I extend my appreciation to the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) and others for securing this Backbench Business debate.

Quite often when we discuss gender issues, the focus seems to be on women. While that might be for good reason, it is vital that gender-based issues affecting men, or matters that may be more prevalent among men, are not overlooked. Today's debate is important as it sends a strong signal to men everywhere that those issues are taken seriously in this place.

Though society has made great steps forward to break down deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes, we still have far to go. Sadly, it is still considered a societal norm to tell someone to "man up" if they are perceived as showing any weakness. Idiomatic terms such as that, or telling someone to "be a man about it" are a reflection of the roles many people—whether consciously or subconsciously—expect men to play.

In much the same way that misogynist values are challenged, perhaps we need to be a little more open-minded about what we view as misandrist. It is no wonder that we see negative consequences such as mental health problems and a high male suicide rate, which stem heavily from such gender-based attitudes.

Men's health is worse than women's everywhere in the world. Men have a higher incidence of heart disease, stroke, diabetes and obesity. In every country in the world, except China, where it is equal, the male suicide rate is much higher than the female rate. On average, male suicides outstrip female ones by a shocking ratio of three to one. In some countries, the ratio is even higher. In Russia, for instance, where constructs of masculinity are perhaps more akin to those in the UK several decades ago, male suicides outweigh women's by six to one.

In the UK, suicide also disproportionately affects men. Some 76% of suicides are men, and suicide is the biggest killer of men under 45. It really is something we ought to discuss with greater frequency. It is not acceptable that, on average, 12 men kill themselves in the UK each day. Much more needs to be done in all corners of the UK.

In Scotland, the male-to-female suicide ratio is the lowest in the UK, yet that is nothing to celebrate, as it is still alarmingly high. Men in Scotland are roughly three times more likely to kill themselves than women. There is no simple fix for this problem; it is multifaceted, with many influencing factors.

This high suicide rate is more than a symptom; it should be an alarm bell warning us of what is truly an epidemic, and we really need to get a handle on the



other issues that drive the ratio up. The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) mentioned the services of the Samaritans, and the hon. Member for Shipley welcomed his intervention as a public service announcement. There is also an organisation called Breathing Space, which can be contacted in Scotland on 0800 83 85 87.

We know that boys and men also face significant challenges at all stages of education, including in terms of attainment. Further to the health challenges I have mentioned, men also have a significantly shorter life expectancy.

There is still a stigma attached to male victims of violence, particularly domestic and sexual violence. Forced or arranged marriages—this is sometimes seen as a women's issue—also impact on the men. Fathers who have separated from partners sometimes face significant parental issues, and certainly do not always have it easy. There is also a general, negative portrayal of men and boys.

While women have seemingly borne the brunt of our traditionally male-dominated society, it is important to recognise the ways in which this has hurt men too. Striving towards proper gender equality is not a case of taking power away from men and giving it to women, but rather addressing an imbalance and enhancing the roles that those of all genders and none have in society. This is not just academic; societies that are more equal tend to be happier and healthier. Gender equality is just one piece of the puzzle that needs to be tackled, along with, for example, other prejudice-based inequalities and income inequality. The road to equality takes many steps.

In 2014, the Scottish Government found that 81% of rough sleepers were men. Clearly, this is one issue that should be, and in Scotland has been, acknowledged. In 2012, the Scottish Government passed ground-breaking legislation that requires local authorities to provide every unintentionally homeless person with somewhere to live. The success of this legislation has gone some way towards addressing a major problem that disproportionately affects men. There remains much more to do, however. Each measure undertaken forms part of a wider picture and goes towards helping to address men's issues.

I do not profess to have all the answers to this very complicated issue, but I do know that we need to work to acknowledge the issues affecting men and redouble our efforts to eliminate the stigma surrounding them. That is the starting point. For real and meaningful equality to be achieved, we must all be involved in this process of change.

4.21 pm

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on securing the debate, which has highlighted some of the important issues that men face. I believe in equality. I spoke in the International Women's Day debate—in fact, I had the pleasure of leading it—so I am being completely equal by turning up for this one today.

It is currently Movember, when brave men are selflessly growing their moustaches to raise awareness of men's issues. I absolutely salute those people. I have noticed a limited number of those moustaches in the Chamber this year. I hope that this Saturday will make a real difference in raising issues that affect our men, such as

male suicide, homelessness and health problems. I am in the Chamber because I was mentored and supported by a man into this role and this job. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), mentors are absolutely vital, particularly in primary school.

I am the chair of the all-party women in Parliament group. Last year, over 70 young women from across the country came to take part in a series of events to look at the opportunities for women in having a voice in this place and how that can make a difference. I absolutely believe that we can do the same thing in this debate today. I am glad to have heard all the contributions from Members on both sides of the Chamber.

Why do we need this debate? I am sure that when we came into work this morning we all saw homeless young men on the streets. If they were young women, perhaps with young children, would they go quite so unnoticed? We are all surrounded by men as fathers, grandfathers, brothers, husbands and dads, and we should be concerned about men's health issues. As we have heard, the suicide rate of men in this country is three times higher than that of women. Sadly, I think we will all know a family friend or a member of our friendship group who has been affected by male suicide. I know one family, in particular, who have lost a son and a husband. That cannot be ignored. Life expectancy for men is too low at 79.

Sadly, obesity and other health-related issues among men are being ignored. One way of dealing with that is by raising such issues in the workplace. Are we offering people a chance to discuss at work issues that they may find more difficult to raise at home? How can we best support men and get them to talk more effectively? Perhaps the workplace is somewhere they feel unsafe, and they do not want to make a fuss or be seen as unmanly. Perhaps they do not want to speak about their feelings about things that are worrying them at home or, indeed, at work.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): I think that the armed forces are slightly ahead of society, because everyone who comes back from operational tours is debriefed, and checked for post-traumatic stress disorder and other worrying signs. That is great and we ought to extend that model to people who are at risk in society in general.

**Mims Davies:** I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning that. He is absolutely right. Work can have a huge bearing on family life. Stress from work comes home and some people have no outlet to deal with it. We are not supporting families and society as a whole.

The Samaritans hotline, which has been mentioned, is 116 123, and it provides an invaluable service 24 hours a day. The number now appears on train tickets. We have all had journeys home delayed because someone has been involved in a serious incident and has not made it home to their family that evening. Suicide is the biggest cause of death in men under the age of 50, so I am pleased that the Government have invested £1.5 million in supporting men and women who are at risk of suicide and self-harm.

However, as we have heard, we can do more, including by making the workplace safer. I recently visited a construction site in my constituency and saw posters about keeping sites safe and making sure that people

[Mims Davies]

feel safe when they go to work. If someone does not feel safe in the setting that they go to every day, and they feel under pressure because they have to support their family, they can end up in a very difficult and lonely place.

**Margaret Ferrier:** In my past life, I worked for a construction company. On health and safety, we always asked, "Would you like to be the person who phones somebody's wife or husband to tell them that something has happened at work and they're not going to return home?" Does the hon. Lady agree that it is important that we look at that area?

**Mims Davies:** Absolutely. Unsafe practices are a burden, particularly if there is no outlet to address them. The issue of health and safety at work can put pressure on men.

On loneliness, men and women, including the elderly, can feel a sense of isolation. I recently visited the Eastleigh Men's Shed, a project set up in 2014 to bring men together to chat and engage in activities such as carpentry and bike repairing. The projects are brilliant. They make miniature Big Ben clocks, so Members can order some. They are available across Eastleigh, but there are also outlets in Andover, Romsey, Portsmouth, Havant and Bognor Regis. I thank Andi and the team for bringing together men who are perhaps lonely, or have caring responsibilities for loved ones and need support. There are some excellent organisations that help people to feel less isolated.

From our case work, we MPs get to highlight those issues that have been raised with us by men and women. We need a culture shift so that people feel that they can come and talk. Men need to be able to feel comfortable on the school run and at sports days and parents evenings. We must also salute men who are carers. I am often visited at my surgery by people who are worried about their wives or their disabled or autistic children, or those who are struggling to manage with a partner who has dementia or a long-term and chronic illness.

Where appropriate, we need to support our men, including by keeping families and children connected after marital or relationship breakdown. This is a watershed moment. I welcome the debate and the fact that such important issues have been raised in the Chamber. I vow, as a woman, to voice my support in this place regarding issues that affect both genders and all our communities.

4.28 pm

**Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Equality, of course, benefits everyone, so I welcome today's debate and congratulate the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on bringing it to the House. I am grateful for the work carried out by many people in my constituency and across the country to address the serious issues of inequality faced by men in many areas of their lives.

Men, of course, are a minority of our population. They live shorter lives, experience high levels of homelessness and suicide, and are less likely to seek help for issues

relating to mental health and substance abuse. It is important that we seriously address those issues. For example, it is important to recognise the ways in which patriarchy hurts men. Toxic masculinity hurts men as well as women.

I am grateful for the work carried out by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), who is in his place and who spoke to *The Huffington Post* earlier this month for its #BoysDoCry campaign, examining the way many men find it hard even to talk about crying and the pressures on men not to seem vulnerable.

**Stuart Blair Donaldson** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making some excellent points. Will she join me in welcoming the launch today of the Be Real campaign's body image pledge, which encourages industries such as fashion and music, among others, to portray realistic body images? Will she also join me in welcoming the fact that it recognises that body image anxiety is an issue not just for women but for men?

**Ms Ahmed-Sheikh:** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his timely intervention, especially given today's release of information about that issue. I support that campaign wholeheartedly. Like the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), I was in the Chamber for International Women's Day, just as I am for International Men's Day today—although arguably 365 days of the year are international men's days.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) touched in great detail and with much effect on the issues of suicide, educational attainment and homelessness, as have many other Members from across the Chamber. I seek simply to support all that has been said about that.

In every community in the country, volunteers and organisations are doing a fantastic and valuable job in addressing the issues that affect men. I am talking about organisations such as the Wee County Men's Shed in my constituency. Men's sheds have already been mentioned this afternoon. I know that there are plans to establish a similar group in Kinross. I have also had the pleasure of supporting the Man Up group in Hawkhill in Alloa, which is made up of local men who meet in a supportive, welcoming and encouraging environment to discuss issues that are important to them.

For equality to be achieved, we all have to be involved in the process of change—women and men alike. Although it is important to address the problems that men face, we must not attack work done to address institutional bias against women. We are in a situation where society has left us with institutional sexism—it is a matter of fact. There are more male Members of this House right now than there have ever been women Members. We cannot make a better, more equal world by saying that there are no ways in which our institutions hurt men, as that of course is not true, but what hurts men and women alike more than all the issues International Men's Day exists to fight is the insistence that there is no sexism in society and that work to promote to equality is an attack by one gender on another. That is why we need to look at the findings of the Good Parliament report, which addresses the ways that this House can become more inclusive for all.

The Scottish National party Government in Scotland have, since 2014, had a gender-balanced Cabinet and we have taken steps to increase representation, but this is not sexism; this is working on balance, because women face glass ceilings every day of their lives. Let us just say it how it is: there are some things we face equally as men and women in society, but so often women face additional challenges—misogyny, sexism and threats of sexual violence—and there is no level playing field. Men are very well represented in this Chamber, and I am very proud of the SNP's women's representation, which increased from one to 20 in last year's elections; we are 36% women but 100% feminists on these Benches.

As women parliamentarians, we often face “mansplaining”—a term I have spoken of before. It was in evidence again in the exchange between the hon. Member for Shipley and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) when it was suggested that she had not read her brief. Any hon. Member will know that my hon. and learned Friend is perhaps the most briefed person who sits in this Chamber and she should be respected for being so. The volume and variety of farmyard-type noises tends to increase when women are on their feet in this Chamber, as do references to appearances and whether or not we have borne children—these things appear so often in the media.

I welcome the debate today and the thoughtful contributions that have been made so far. Addressing inequality wherever it lies, benefits us all, and we must not be hypocritical in that regard. If we believe in equality, it must be equality for everybody. So I do take issue with the hon. Member for Shipley, who voted consistently against equal gay rights and against laws to promote equality and human rights. I note that today he has watered down his comments from last year somewhat. He said today, “I want to be very clear that I do not believe there is actually an issue between men and women and that people try to be politically correct.” Last year, he said:

“I do not believe there is actually an issue between men and women. Often, problems are stirred up by those who might be described as militant feminists and the politically correct males who sometimes pander to them.”

He added:

“One of the most depressing things to happen recently was the introduction of the Select Committee on Women and Equalities.”—[*Official Report*, 19 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 242WH.]

What a disservice to this Parliament. As if that was not enough, on Second Reading of the Equality and Diversity (Reform) Bill in 2011, he said:

“It is a massive step towards inequality for men, and the poor souls just let the women walk all over them. They do not appear to care what will happen to them.”—[*Official Report*, 21 October 2011; Vol. 533, c. 1195.]

At the international conference on men's issues in 2016, he talked about

“equality but only when it suits”.

In that respect, I say to him, “Right back at you.”

This is an important debate. Respecting rights and equality for all has to be at the top of all that we do in this Chamber. [*Interruption.*] I am happy to take an intervention, because people are muttering from a sedentary position.

**Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con):** The hon. Lady has stood up and made some interesting points. Does she not accept that every time there is some positive discrimination in favour of a woman, by implication a man is being discriminated against, and it may well be a working-class boy or someone from a working-class background who suffers as a result of positive discrimination in favour of women?

**Ms Ahmed-Sheikh:** I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Although I accept some of the points about discrimination against working-class men, I have to say that coming from those on the Tory Benches, the comment absolutely beggars belief. Those of us who actually believe in equality prefer to use the term “positive action”. The reason why we need positive action is that there is not equality in our society. We are 52% women, but we cannot even be properly represented in this Chamber. I would welcome any efforts that he might wish to make, working with me and with others from the Conservative party and across the Chamber, to achieve gender equality, because gender equality will mean a better society for all.

**Stuart Blair Donaldson:** My hon. Friend is making some excellent points. Does she agree with me—I say this as the youngest male in this place—that men of quality do not fear equality for others?

**Ms Ahmed-Sheikh:** I welcome another excellent intervention from the youngest male Member of Parliament. Let the youngest male Member of Parliament be an example to us all, to show us that we can indeed fill these Benches with men like my hon. Friend who believe in equality and accept the fact that we do not have a level playing field.

I welcome the fact that many important issues have been discussed in today's debate, but let us not allow that to overshadow or overtake the very real and accepted work that has to be done in this Chamber and across society to achieve equality for all—equality without hypocrisy—because equality is better for society and for everybody.

4.38 pm

**Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to follow the SNP spokeswoman in this important debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), a fellow Yorkshire MP, on securing this debate in the main Chamber this year. As we have heard, International Men's Day falls on 19 November, which is Saturday, and one of the themes this year is the high suicide rate among men. The Opposition welcome the opportunity to discuss seriously that issue and all other matters relating to the health and wellbeing of men and boys. We also recognise the opportunity that International Men's Day presents to examine the societal pressures facing young men, particularly around body image and traditional ideas about masculinity, which can add a burden of expectation to young men and limit the psychological and physical horizons of both men and women.

I will first address the theme of International Men's Day this year—namely, the high suicide rate among men—and then I will move on to address International Men's Day in general. Simply put, the rate of suicide among men in this country is far too high. The rate of



[Paula Sherriff]

male suicide is more than three times the rate of female suicide. There are 16.8 male deaths per 100,000, compared with 5.2 female deaths per 100,000. Although it is true that suicide is the most common cause of death in men under the age of 45, the Office for National Statistics found that the highest rate of suicide actually occurs in men between the ages of 45 and 59, at 23.9 deaths per 100,000 according to 2014 figures. This is clearly a complex issue that can affect men of any age.

I am conscious that I may cover similar ground to last year's debate in Westminster Hall, when male suicide was specified in the motion. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) for her words as the then shadow Minister for mental health. In particular, she emphasised that "suicide is not inevitable." By paying due attention to the societal and medical factors that can contribute to the increased risk of suicide and by ensuring that proper care is available when such factors arise, we can do much better. Unfortunately, we often fall short. Although we have made great inroads into understanding the various facets of the wider problem—the difficulties young men face with body image, the negative effects of unemployment on mental health, the greater propensity of men to abuse alcohol and drugs and the scale of the suicide epidemic in our prisons—we all too often fail to respond to such situations adequately in the areas of education, work and criminal justice.

Additionally, as my hon. Friend also mentioned in last year's debate, we now understand that men tend to use more lethal methods in attempting suicide, so early and effective intervention in mental health is crucial. Sadly, the help that people need is often simply not there at the time they need it. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) recently spoke very movingly in the House about the tragedy of losing his nephew to suicide after being told that he would have to wait for up to six months to access a talking therapy. It is a pain recognised by all too many families across this country.

We have found that accident and emergency departments continue to face unprecedented pressures, and we hear that many are now also facing closure. That is felt very acutely in my constituency. A&E is often the place where people find themselves when seeking treatment for a mental health crisis. Waiting times in excess of four hours, longer journeys to the nearest A&E department and a reported lack of mental health nurses all serve to present further barriers to people finding the help they need during a mental health crisis, with sadly predictable consequences.

I welcome the excellent speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher), who referred to the "It Takes Balls to Talk" initiative in Coventry. I was fortunate to visit it recently with the Health Committee to hear about some of the fantastic work it is doing. It is true that such factors affect anybody suffering from difficulties with mental health, but the fact that the suicide rate is so much higher among men makes it all the more pressing for men's health that these issues are tackled—and tackled soon.

I now turn to the issue of International Men's Day in general. Labour Members welcome the day as an opportunity to highlight and have a serious discussion

about the issues facing the wellbeing of men and boys. There are many challenges, such as the continuing battle against health conditions, such as testicular and prostate cancer, where it is recognised that there remains a reticence among some men about visiting a doctor to catch problems early. It is very timely that we should hold this debate in November—or Movember. There are also challenges about the educational attainment of boys in schools and the lack of men teaching, particularly in primary schools, as well as about the recognition of domestic violence towards men, as several hon. Members have said.

We also want to highlight the societal pressures involving body image, gender roles, and sex and relationships. Labour is committed to compulsory, age-appropriate sex and relationships education to promote gender equality, mutual respect and healthy relationships from an early age. This is also about ensuring that young men and women are educated in an atmosphere of mutual respect that broadens their horizons and does not pigeonhole them from the start of life. Although this would be of benefit to both young men and women, it should be noted that such pigeonholing is one of the many gender disparities that still predominantly affect women.

The fact that there are currently more male MPs in the House in this Parliament than the number of female MPs who have ever been elected illustrates that there is still such a long way to go. With regard to respect and healthy relationships, the fact that an average of two women in this country are killed each week by a violent partner or former partner illustrates once again that there is still much further to go.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Does the hon. Lady agree that we are doing men a disservice if we do not address our shortcomings during this debate, given that men still perpetrate about 80% of all domestic violence cases? As we approach the international day for the elimination of violence against women, will she join me in calling on all male MPs to take the White Ribbon pledge

"never to commit, condone, or remain silent about men's violence against women in all its forms"?

**Paula Sherriff:** I am happy to join the hon. Gentleman in that pledge. The White Ribbon campaign does some absolutely wonderful work, including in many schools. I am proud to support that initiative.

The continued existence of the gender pay gap, which we recognised in this place only last week, stands as a shameful testament to the inequalities still faced by women, as does the horrendous abuse I received on Twitter and by email for even daring to mention it. The Library tells us that a gender pay gap exists across all sectors of full-time work, some 46 years after the Equal Pay Act 1970.

These are not just issues for women. Organisations such as the White Ribbon campaign and the United Nations HeForShe campaign have capably demonstrated how men not only can but often actively want to play their part in fighting for the safety and equality of women. Indeed, the founder of the latter, Elizabeth Nyamayaro, has said that the campaign started from the mistaken premise that men might not be interested in gender equality, only to later find that the question was merely

one of extent. Those positive programmes demonstrate that feminism and equality are not matters of interest to women only.

Although I have congratulated the hon. Member for Shipley on securing the debate, I do not think it would be unreasonable to suggest that he has made something of a name for himself in vociferously standing against feminism. He has gained notoriety in that regard, including by speaking this summer at an event organised by the Justice for Men and Boys party, which garnered media attention. I find that regrettable, as that organisation is sadly—I shall put this charitably—on the less constructive side of the argument.

The most cursory look at that organisation's website brings a whole new meaning to the word "patronising". It celebrates articles such as "13 reasons women lie about being raped", and currently harbours awards including "Lying Feminist of the Month", "Whiny Feminist of the Month", "Gormless Feminist of the Month" and "Toxic Feminist of the Month". As several of my hon. Friends appear to have been added to those lists for simply standing at this Dispatch Box doing what I am doing today, I dare say that I may well be at risk of ending up on one of them myself. Suffice it to say that I am not afraid. The nature of the organisation's discourse is little better than that of the Twitter trolls who constantly confront female Members just for daring to speak up. I find the hon. Gentleman's association with that organisation most regrettable.

I mention that not to detract from the issues raised today, but to highlight the fact that this event does not exist in a vacuum. Thanks to such rhetoric, there is a charged and poisonous atmosphere surrounding these issues, and I fear that many people will see International Men's Day not as standing alongside International Women's Day but as standing in opposition to it. We must send a message from this House that that is a false dichotomy that creates division where none need exist.

Many hon. Members have said this before me, but it is important to emphasise that equality is not a zero-sum game. The rise of feminism does not mean that men have been in some way denigrated or disfranchised. I hope that we all recognise that work remains to be done for both men and women, but that an improvement in the lot of one does not inherently detract from the rights of the other. In short, we should have no truck with those who would use this event to further divide us. I cannot say it better than the International Men's Day website itself, which lists as two of its objectives:

"To improve gender relations and promote gender equality... To create a safer, better world; where people can be safe and grow to reach their full potential."

In those objectives, it has our full support.

4.48 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinage):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on securing this really important debate. I know that he, I and all the other Members who have taken part and spoken so excellently share the same conviction: that no one, whether male or female, should suffer unfair or unequal treatment because of their gender.

Such treatment can have devastating consequences for the lives of both men and women. Like other parents of sons up and down the country, I am aware of

the challenges that boys face as they negotiate the road to manhood. We are at a moment in time when increasing numbers of people—men and women—are questioning a system of laws, norms and beliefs that have systematically disadvantaged women over centuries. But we sometimes forget that confining women within social norms also acts to confine men. Every restriction placed on the lives of women has had a consequence for the lives of men. Where women are told they are weak, men are told that they have to be strong and that there is something very wrong with them if they experience fear, vulnerability or emotion. Where women are told that they are naturally suited to childcare, then men are implicitly told that they are not. Where women are encouraged to be the homemakers, then the pressure falls on men to be the breadwinners.

The fact that men suffer from sexism is not a sign that the fight for equality has gone too far, but that it has not gone far enough. Gender equality is not, as the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) said, a zero-sum game where the gains of one sex can only be achieved at the expense of the other. Equality is good for all and for society as a whole. That does mean that people do sometimes have to give up privileges that have not been earned, but they have much, much more to gain from the creation of a fairer society for all.

I am not Minister for Women and Equalities because I am partisan to women, but because the key task in achieving gender equality is to establish a level playing field for women. That does not mean that we neglect the interests of men. I hope all here will agree that the introduction of shared parental leave was a huge step forward in supporting men to become more involved and fulfilled fathers. Our pioneering programme on homophobic bullying in schools benefits not just children who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, but all boys who have been insulted or assaulted because they were considered not sporty or manly enough.

Our innovative work programme on body image recognises that boys too can feel overwhelmed by cultural messages about how they are supposed to look and behave. I am as concerned as anyone when men's eating disorders are referred to as "manorexia", as that does not describe the severity and seriousness of the issue. Our new teen relationship abuse campaign, Disrespect NoBody, reaches out to all young people, deliberately moving away from images and text that imply that men are always the perpetrators of relationship abuse and women always the victims. We know that that simply is not the case.

I want to say a bit more about violence. I am hugely proud of the Government's national strategy on violence against women and girls. We have made great strides, but there is a long way to go, particularly in tackling sexual harassment in public spaces and online misogyny. As my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley rightly pointed out, violence features in boys' lives, too. As my son moves through his teenage years, I am acutely aware of how vulnerable young men are to assault on the streets and in pubs and clubs. I can only guess at how much fear and anxiety this causes boys and men. I say "guess", because we very rarely hear men talking about those feelings. Why? Because of social norms that suggest that men should be powerful and invulnerable.

[Caroline Dinenage]

There is the expectation that men should not show how much violence hurts or scares them. They keep it bottled up. Even worse, they express it through depression, drinking or aggression. Maybe it makes it harder for them to stand up to other men who may be harassing women or belittling other men, and say, "This is not okay." As my hon. Friend pointed out, many of the dreadful things that are happening to women are happening to men, too. Just because statistically there are much lower numbers does not mean they are any less important or should not be talked about. It does not mean that victims' lives are any less valued.

**Bob Stewart:** I have sat here for most of the debate—I missed just the first two minutes—but I have not heard anyone talk about the strength that men and women get from being in a family, whether unmarried or married. Living with other people is a huge benefit. I just wanted to put it on record that family matters.

**Caroline Dinenage:** Of course, family does matter. What also matters is that victims can be male or female. In some instances, men are the hidden victims. Earlier this year, during International Women's Day, the whole House listened in stunned and horrified silence as one of the hon. Members listed the names of every single woman who had been killed at the hands of a violent partner or ex-partner. There were 81 of them—every single life lost an absolute tragedy. In the same year, 19 men suffered that same fate. No one read their names out. That is not okay.

The UK has made a £36 million commitment towards efforts to end child marriage, early marriage and forced marriage overseas. As the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) point out, while the majority of those affected by child marriage are girls, UNICEF estimates that 18% of those married under the age of 18 are boys. That is not okay.

Crime surveys for England and Wales estimate that there were 610,000 male victims of domestic violence last year. I say "estimate" because, like many women, men are often reluctant to come forward and report crimes of this nature. And that is not okay. We continue to support front-line organisations working with male victims. The Home Office has extended £120,000 until April 2017 for the men's advice line, which provides support and advice to male victims of domestic violence; while £90,000 has been provided to Galop to run a domestic abuse helpline for gay, bi and trans people affected by domestic violence and abuse. In 2016-17, the Ministry of Justice allocated £452,000 to 12 organisations in England and Wales to provide face-to-face services for male victims of rape and sexual violence.

Every time a little boy is told to zip up his man suit and be brave in circumstances where a girl would be cuddled or comforted, we are contributing to an ideal that a real man is fearless and emotionless. Most men treat this version of masculinity, which they see in characters in the media such as James Bond and those played by Steven Seagal, who are self-contained, aggressive, disconnected and always walking alone, with intelligence and resilience, but there are risks, particularly for the vulnerable and isolated, and these messages can be particularly toxic for men suffering from mental health issues.

We have heard a lot today about male suicide. Our national suicide prevention strategy highlights men as a high-risk group for what is perhaps the ultimate expression of despair, disconnection and aggression turned inwards. I am very encouraged by the work that the Department of Health has done with the National Suicide Prevention Alliance to identify innovative projects and to target mental wellbeing and suicide prevention support at men—projects such as the Men's Sheds movement, which my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) has mentioned. I was there at the start of the Gosport Men's Shed, which is now one of the biggest in the country. One gentleman there told me that it had literally saved his life.

In addition, the Department recently announced further financial support of more than £12.5 million over the next five years for the Time to Change programme, which seeks to bring attitudinal change towards people with mental health issues. Bottling up emotions and not being able to talk freely about feelings have implications not only for mental health but for physical health. Other Members have spoken about organisations such as the Movember Foundation and all the amazing men—and women—who attempt to grow moustaches in November, in order to raise issues such as prostate cancer that affect men and where early diagnosis and treatment can save lives.

I was going to speak about boys' attainment in schools and justice in the family and criminal courts, but, in the interests of time, I will not. I will conclude by saying that my officials and the Government Equalities Office are there to tackle inequality wherever we find it, and we are actively exploring some of the issues touched upon today, in dialogue with groups such as White Ribbon, the Great Men initiative, HeForShe and Respect. These organisations do an enormous amount of good work, and I am confident that together we will make good progress in engaging even more men with gender equality.

And what of International Men's Day? Of course it is a good thing. Anything that gets people to stop and think about equality and the inequalities we have spoken about today is important, and I will certainly consider all the points raised. Equality benefits everyone, and I hope that we can continue to share a constructive dialogue on how we can achieve a fairer, more just and kinder world for all.

4.58 pm

**Philip Davies:** I thank everyone who has participated in this debate. We have heard some fantastic speeches. The hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) made a fantastic speech. I was very interested and pleased to hear about the excellent work of It Takes Balls to Talk. My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) made a typically fantastic speech, even though he had to admit that Australia was ahead of us in some ways. I am sure it was a painful thing for him to have to admit, but we are grateful to him for pointing it out.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) made a terrific speech highlighting the work that Breathing Space does in her area. I am delighted that she has had the opportunity to mention that. Likewise, my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) made a passionate and impressive speech,



and again I am delighted that she was able to highlight Men's Sheds and Movember, even though I will not be participating in the latter—much to everyone's relief.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) rather trivialised today's debate by talking about women instead of men. I am sure the fact that she thinks international men's day is every day is very little comfort to the 134,554 men who have committed suicide over the last 30 years. I found that regrettable.

Finally, I am pleased that we agreed on one thing—equality. I believe in gender equality, and I very much hope that after this debate, men and women will be treated equally by the courts when they get sentenced.

5 pm

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).*

## PETITION

### Post Office Closure in Tonbridge

5 pm

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The post office in Tonbridge provides an accessible service to people across our community, and closing it would deprive residents of our growing and thriving town of the central services and support that this stand-alone Crown post office provides. That is why more than 1,000 people have signed a petition calling for the decision to be reversed.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to note their objections to the proposed closure by Post Office Ltd of the existing stand-alone post office on Tonbridge High Street and its proposed relocation within another existing local business.

*Following is the full text of the petition:*

*[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom, Declares that the proposed closure by Post Office Ltd of the existing stand-alone post office on Tonbridge High Street is unacceptable; and further that the post office should not be relocated within another existing local business.*

*The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to note their objections to the proposed closure by Post Office Ltd of the existing stand-alone post office on Tonbridge High Street and its proposed relocation within another existing local business.*

*And the petitioners remain, etc.]*

[P001979]

## Maxwellisation Process

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

5.1 pm

**Roger Mullin** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): It is indeed an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Madam Deputy Speaker. One thing I know about your good self is that any interventions or judgments that you make in the course of the debate will be both independent and timeous—matters not unconnected to this debate. I say from the outset that my intention is to raise an important matter for discussion. I do so with humility. I do not pretend that I have all the answers, which may come as a major shock to many of my hon. Friends.

On a number of occasions here, I called for the early publication of the Chilcot report. I was met with sympathy from the Government, but it was clear that one reason for such a long delay in the publication was the Maxwellisation process that Sir John Chilcot chose to follow, when there was no statutory requirement at all for him to do so. It is also very clear that there has been a gradual adoption of the Maxwellisation process in areas of investigation and reporting which fundamentally calls into question whether reports are, in fact, truly independent.

In response to a query from my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) a short time ago, and to put it in layman's terms, I should say that Maxwellisation is the process of sending extracts of reports to individuals who are criticised in some way, allowing them in many cases an extraordinary length of time to respond. We then are blind as to how far their responses lead report authors to change their judgments. This is not just a process of checking the facts, as competent inquiries will check the facts as they go along. This process allows individuals facing criticism to challenge the interpretation and judgment of report authors. That is a fundamental undermining of the independence of those report authors and it does a disservice to the House.

My own background makes me rather sceptical of, and concerned about, the approach. For well over 30 years, I ran a series of small research companies, and we were often commissioned to undertake investigations into organisations of many sorts, often involving the behaviour of groups that were undertaking activities that were disadvantageous to the organisation or the wider society. It would not be unreasonable to say that all my past clients valued the fact that at the end the day they knew they would be getting my conclusions and my recommendations alone. They might have gone on to criticise and debate those recommendations or amend them, but what they valued most was that somebody was investigating a situation and was willing to draw conclusions independently that could then set an agenda for others to pursue.

In another part of my life, I was sometimes involved in academic research. Much of the greatest academic research that is undertaken in, for example, the social sciences explores the role of human behaviour, often citing individual instances, but there is no requirement for academic authors to return to the individuals dealt with in their studies and ask them to comment on their

[Roger Mullin]

interpretations. Indeed, that would be considered bad practice, as it would undermine their academic freedom. When it comes to politics, however, over the years we have developed for the House of Commons a process that allows people who are subject to criticism to be the only ones who are given sight of what is going to be said, and the only ones who are allowed to respond to authors.

Why has this issue arisen? Originally, the so-called Salmon letters emerged from an inquiry undertaken by the Royal Commission on Tribunals of Inquiry, which reported in 1966. The letters were intended to warn individuals of criticisms and give them an opportunity to respond, but the procedures set out by Lord Justice Salmon were heavily criticised for being more suited to an adversarial trial than to an inquisitorial process.

Then, some years later, along came that corporate crook Robert Maxwell. Maxwellisation developed from a judgment in a private action brought by him against the Department of Trade and Industry. Maxwell applied for an interim injunction to restrain inspectors from proceeding with their investigation. Mr Justice Forbes declined to grant the injunction, but said that natural justice demanded that draft conclusions that were critical of a person should be submitted to that person to give them an opportunity to respond. Maxwell then took legal action directly against the DTI. Mr Justice Wien found against him, and an appeal ensued.

Lord Denning, Master of the Rolls at the time, was one of the judges who heard the appeal against the second judgment, and he upheld Mr Justice Wien's conclusions. Despite that, the myth has arisen that Maxwellisation developed as a result of a victory in court by Maxwell, although in fact he continually lost, and that Maxwellisation is a legal requirement, which it is not, although many people think it is. It is simply a kind of convention that has been adopted but has no legal force.

Creeping Maxwellisation has been leading to concerns in different areas. I have cited Chilcot, which was not a statutory inquiry but a Privy Counsellor inquiry established by my predecessor as Member of Parliament for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, but, more recently, the Treasury Committee has shown considerable interest in the subject. In April this year, it announced an inquiry into Maxwellisation. Its Chair, the right hon. Member for Chichester (Mr Tyrie), has been quoted as saying:

“It took seven years for taxpayers—who had to foot the £20.5 billion bail-out of HBOS—to obtain a full explanation of HBOS's failure. Serious management, governance and regulatory oversight failures all contributed to the bank's collapse. The seven year wait was prolonged”—

seriously prolonged—

“by Maxwellisation. The public will want reassurance that Maxwellisation is fair and proportionate, and does not lead to unacceptable delays...Maxwellisation was never intended to be a means by which interminable argument would develop about every last detail of a regulator's report. To permit that would undermine confidence in the public review process.”

Indeed, it is perhaps not unreasonable of me to speculate that the lack of action against some rogue bankers was made easier by the absence of robust, independent reports.

One concern for those in favour of the process of Maxwellisation is that without it some individuals might be exposed to defamation action. I am guessing this might be a concern both for some individuals who are cited in reports in a critical way and for the report authors. However, I believe there is a means to bring Maxwellisation to an end without opening the prospect of defamation proceedings, thereby assisting both in having reports published more quickly and having greater confidence in their independence.

My understanding is that the best way to evade the legal difficulties raised by making criticisms of individuals without giving them the right to the process of Maxwellisation is to make the report of any inquiry a so-called return to Parliament. This was the case for the Scott and Hutton inquiries for instance. This ensures that the report enjoys the protection of the Parliamentary Papers Act 1840 and is subject to privilege. It is quite clear to me that there has been utterly inadequate scrutiny of the Maxwellisation process.

It is with great regret that I have to say that over many months I kept asking, very often at Business questions, “Where is the Chilcot report?” Many other Members were asking the same question. I am very sad now that I was unaware that there were ways in which we could have avoided this. I was unaware that Chilcot did not need to invoke a Maxwellisation process; it was simply his personal choice as chair of that inquiry. I think the time is coming when the Government need to think very seriously about whether this House is well served by a process that undermines the independence of reports brought to this House.

As I move towards a conclusion—I want to allow the Minister sufficient time to respond—I shall quote the journalist Chris Ames, who followed the Chilcot inquiry and wrote extensively on Maxwellisation. He feared that independence was being subverted in another way:

“Although the inquiry began in 2009, and all witnesses have had years to bring evidence to its attention, it appears that Maxwellees have been allowed to read and cite other confidential documents, besides those cited by the inquiry. Have any conditions or limitations been imposed on this exercise?”

We do not know. He continues:

“Without them, there is a clear risk that it could turn into an unlimited fishing expedition by Maxwellees in pursuit of material which would help their defence.”

How much new material they introduced into the process we still do not know.

In a former life—I have had many—I taught in the area of judgment theory. Those who have researched judgments know only too well that if we allow simply a one-sided process for people only to search out the evidence that suits them, we cannot have a balanced view. We cannot have confidence that we have a balanced view if the only people who were asked to submit to the report's authors were those few who were criticised, but those who would make criticisms did not have the same rights of review, let alone, in the instance of Chilcot, the families who suffered the grievous burden of Iraq having the same rights as those criticised.

**Richard Arkless** (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that if the primary concern about Maxwellisation is the prospect of defamation, and defamation cannot happen unless the statement is false, would not one solution be that public inquiries get

protection from defamation? Under Maxwellisation, the offended party could simply say, "It wasn't me, gov" and persuade that there is an action for defamation, and then all those allegations fall. There is a simple solution, is there not?

**Roger Mullin:** I defer to my hon. Friend, who is a distinguished lawyer trained in both the Scottish and English jurisdictions. I would hesitate to criticise him at all. It strikes me that he is making another intervention on a reasonable point that the Government should consider. I hope that the Minister will respond in the same spirit and let us seek solutions that will allow us to preserve the independence of reporting to this House.

5.15 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) on securing the debate. When the Government decide that an inquiry is needed to investigate a matter of public concern, they will generally begin by asking whether it should be held under the Inquiries Act 2005 and use the Inquiry Rules 2006. Inquiries can be non-statutory, as was the case for the Iraq inquiry. Inquiries may also be established under specific legislation such as the Financial Services Act 2012. However they are constituted, inquiries perform an important role of holding public bodies to account, and providing answers to issues and events of concern. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that an inquiry and its eventual report must be, and must be seen to be, independent of the Government.

The principle of Maxwellisation allows those at risk of criticism in an official report to respond before that report is published. The process takes its name from Robert Maxwell, who was criticised in a Department of Trade and Industry report as being

"unfit to hold the stewardship of a public company".

He took that matter to court and in fact lost his case, but the Court of Appeal reaffirmed that the principles of natural justice require prior notice to be given of actual or potential criticism so that an individual can be given a chance to respond. There are also what are known as Salmon principles, which came from Lord Justice Salmon's 1966 royal commission on tribunals of inquiry. The second principle states:

"Before any person who is involved in an inquiry is called as a witness, he should be informed of any allegations which are made against him and the substance of the evidence in support of them."

This means that when someone gives evidence, the inquiry chair should notify them in advance if they are at risk of criticism, and of the reasons for it, so that they can address those issues when they give their evidence.

We all want the warning letter process to be handled as quickly as possible, but I do not share the concern that it can affect the independence of an inquiry's findings and report. The Government believe that the process is fair and transparent, and that it does not prevent an inquiry from producing an independent and robust report.

**Roger Mullin:** Am I correct in interpreting the Minister as saying that he does not believe there is a case for setting a time limit for this process? I am sure he is well

aware that one of the criticisms of the Chilcot inquiry, and of the HBOS inquiry that I cited earlier, was that people took an interminable amount of time to respond. Surely it would be reasonable to establish a protocol to ensure that the process is not dragged out unnecessarily by those who are subject to criticism.

**Dr Lee:** The Maxwellisation process in the Chilcot inquiry did take a long time, but in response to the hon. Gentleman, I should like to quote Sir John Chilcot. He has stated:

"The Maxwell process, first, was essential, but secondly, did not hold up the rest of the work. While we had draft text out for comment from criticised witnesses, we were doing all sorts of other work to finalise the report...I think that it did, in the end, prove a constructive dimension to the Inquiry's work."

As I was saying, we all want the warning letter process to be handled as quickly as possible, but I do not share the concern that it can affect the independence of an inquiry's findings and report. The Government believe that the process is fair and transparent and does not prevent the inquiry from producing an independent and robust report. Furthermore, under the 2005 Act, the chair has a duty to have regard to fairness and must be impartial. There is nothing in the Act or rules that requires a chair to change their report in the light of any representations received from an individual. The purpose of the warning is not to seek a person's consent to what the chair is minded to say about them. I am confident that inquiry chairs take a sensible and robust approach that does not allow for abuse of the process, and I am also confident that they will continue to do so.

The Lords Select Committee on the Inquiries Act 2005 published its findings in March 2014. The report cited evidence on the warning letter process from inquiry chairs such as Sir Robert Francis, QC, the chair of the Mid Staffordshire inquiry. He said:

"Some recipients asked that they be given sight of any revision of the potential criticism before publication of the Inquiry report. I declined to do so; first because the Rules do not provide for such a facility, and second because it would have been impracticable and undesirable."

It is therefore clear that inquiry chairs are adequately equipped to deal with inappropriate requests and that the process does not mean that there needs to be endless back and forth until the recipient is happy with what will be said.

On 2 November 2016, when giving evidence to the Liaison Committee about the Iraq inquiry, Sir John Chilcot said:

"in the pursuit of fairness, and also in the pursuit of getting the best possible quality of report, the Maxwell process, far from holding up the show, actually improved the eventual outcome. For example, our attention was brought to documents that had not been either disclosed or discovered in the course of our other evidence-taking and that were relevant. Then again, where you get two individuals' perspectives on the same point, and they are not the same perspective, it is very helpful to know that and to be able to either come to a conclusion about it or, as we did in one case, simply point to the fact there is a clash of evidence which couldn't be resolved."

**Richard Arkless:** While the Minister is making points about the virtues of Maxwellisation in certain circumstances, is he able to say whether Maxwellisation in the case of the Chilcot report meant that the original findings were diluted to what we saw in the final report?



**Dr Lee:** The Government cannot speculate on the extent to which the report was modified as a result of Maxwellisation. It was a confidential process between the independent inquiry and those individuals subject to the process. However, as I said, Sir John Chilcot said in evidence to the Liaison Committee:

“in the pursuit of fairness, and also in the pursuit of getting the best possible quality of report, the Maxwell process...actually improved the eventual outcome.”

I firmly support the Maxwellisation principle. Those criticised in a report must be made aware of that before they read about it in the newspapers. Criticism could have an impact on their livelihood, or there may be a risk of later legal action. Of course, in many cases, individuals may already be aware of the criticism, although they might not be aware of its extent or seriousness. Equally, the criticism might never have been raised, so it is only right that individuals are given a chance to respond before publication. However, I absolutely agree that the process should be neither over-bureaucratic nor cause delay.

The Government recognise that it can be hugely difficult for families involved in inquiries to understand the various processes. They should feel confident that processes and the inquiry report are transparent and independent of the Government. The current system achieves that, but there is room for improvement. The Lords Select Committee also raised concerns about delays, requests for redrafts and an over-prescriptive process. We have been considering its recommendations about the warning letter process under the 2006 rules. We agree that chairs need more flexibility while ensuring that those who are unaware of criticism, or its extent, have prior notification and a chance to respond. I hope that my remarks provide reassurance that while we are clear that Maxwellisation is a key element in inquiries, it must be a simple process that does not adversely affect their independence or add significantly to their length.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.24 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

Thursday 17 November 2016

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

## Soil Health

[*Relevant documents: First Report from the Environmental Audit Committee of Session 2016-17, on Soil Health, HC 180, and the Government response, HC 650.*]

1.30 pm

**Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the First Report of the Environmental Audit Committee, Soil Health, HC 180, and the Government response, HC 650.

May I say what a pleasure it is to be here with you today, Mr Bone, to discuss the vital issue of the nation's soil health? I believe this is the first time that the UK Parliament has ever discussed the health of our soil, which is a vital part of the nation's ecosystems. I warmly welcome the Minister to her post—I know we will have a good discussion today—and my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who is the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson on this issue. I am grateful to Mr Speaker and to the House for this first ever debate, which is on the Environmental Audit Committee's report into soil health.

I begin by thanking my Committee colleagues for their work and all the other hon. Members across the House who have a long-standing, informed interest in protecting the environment. One of the first findings of our report is that soil is a Cinderella environmental issue. It is an earthy subject; it is not clear like water, and it receives a lot less attention than air pollution, water quality and climate change. Yet whether we realise it or not, society relies on healthy soil for the food that we eat, for flood prevention and for storing carbon. The UK's soils are only about 10,000 years old, which is one of the fascinating facts we learnt as we went through our inquiry. Soil supports 95% of the world's food production—the other 5% is probably fish and perhaps stuff from trees, although trees grow in soil as well—so if soils start going down, human life will follow soon after.

The Government say they want our soil to be sustainably managed by 2030, but we found no evidence that they are putting in place the policies to make that happen. Although healthy soil is a vital tool in the fight against climate change, degraded soils harm the environment and can even contribute to climate change by emitting carbon into the atmosphere, so it is vital that robust mechanisms are put in place to promote soil health and reverse soil degradation. We welcome the Government's aspiration for UK soils to be managed sustainably, but we need ambitious targets, effective policy and strong enforcement mechanisms to make sure that happens, and we did not see that action.

Let me turn first to the vexatious issue of contaminated land. This is absolutely vital if we are to have a resource-efficient country that uses everything well. That includes brownfield land, rather than taking more land from our beloved greenbelt, which, as we all know as constituency MPs, is a deeply controversial issue.

A key area of concern was the fact that 300,000 hectares of UK soil are contaminated with toxins, including lead, nickel, tar, asbestos and radioactive substances. Those contaminated sites can be a public health risk and can even pollute our water supplies. The contamination is the result of the UK's proud industrial heritage in areas such as mine and that of the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk). That is not a problem in areas with very high land values, where sites are mostly dealt with through the planning system, so that developers can see what the cost of remediating and cleaning the soil—washing it, which is what actually happens—will be, and they are happy to do that. That happened, for example, at London's Olympic park: the soil was actually lifted up and washed before the development began. I am sure we are exporting that amazing technology all round the world.

In areas where land values are low, where the local authority owns the land or where rogue developers have failed to clean up before construction, local councils have a statutory duty under part 2A of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 to clean up contaminated land. However, the Government have withdrawn capital grant funding, which enables councils to do that.

Let me give an example from Wakefield of a housing estate in Ossett. It was built in the 1970s on the site of an old paintworks, when environmental regulations were much less stringent than they are today. In 2012, the council discovered that people's back gardens were contaminated with asbestos, lead, arsenic and a derivative of coal tar, which can cause cancer. Cleaning up that toxic legacy would have cost residents £20,000 to £30,000 each, leaving their homes blighted and unsellable. Thankfully, Wakefield Council secured more than £300,000 from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in contaminated land grants to clean up the toxic mess.

However, our inquiry heard that the cut to the capital grant has severely undermined local councils' ability to tackle the problem. It means that sites such as Sand Hill Park in Gunnislake in Cornwall, Upton Court Park in Slough and McCormack Avenue in St Helens will be left untreated. Many councils simply do not have the resources to investigate contaminated sites, and we heard that councils would be reluctant to investigate a site—rightly—knowing that they could not secure funding for remediation.

There is a real danger that contaminated sites are being left unidentified, with potential harm to public health. Ministers have been clear that relying on the planning regime alone does not solve the contaminated land problem and could exacerbate regional inequalities. There is a risk of no remediation being done, and in some cases the houses were built in Victorian times, so there is no developer to pursue. The Government have not produced an impact assessment that we have seen—I am happy if the Minister wants to correct me—on the cessation of the capital grant scheme, but it is wrong to state, as Ministers have, that contamination can be addressed through the revenue support grant. Correspondence published by my Committee from December 2013 shows the then DEFRA Minister, Lord de Mauley, saying that the Government never intended the revenue support grant to take the place of capital grant funding.

The Government have cut £17 million of funding since 2009-10, leaving just half a million pounds, with the funding essentially being phased out in 2016-17.

[Mary Creagh]

Capital support grants, not revenue support grants, have financed 80% of the cost of cleaning up contaminated sites. Fewer than 2% of cases have been remediated through other public funding, suggesting that the revenue support grant has rarely been used to meet councils' statutory responsibilities under part 2A.

Revenue support grant—the clue is in the name, is it not? It is there to help councils with their revenue needs, not these sorts of big capital needs. Some councils facing the biggest problems with contaminated sites are coping with the most severe budget cuts. Wakefield Council is cutting £27 million of spending this year. We believe it is essential that DEFRA provides a dedicated funding stream to decontaminate sites, to use brownfield properly and to have a resource-efficient approach to the planning system. It should be set at the level of the previous scheme—around £19.5 million in today's prices.

I was concerned to learn that since the publication of our report both DEFRA and the Department for Communities and Local Government have proposed amendments to planning regulations in the Neighbourhood Planning Bill that will curtail the right of local planning authorities to attach pre-commencement planning conditions to brownfield development approvals. The requirement for these conditions to be agreed with developers in advance or be subject to appeal will prevent local authorities from ensuring that site investigation, risk assessment and clean-up works take place before development begins. Furthermore, the CL:AIRE national quality mark scheme, which aims to speed up approval for development on brownfield sites, risks negating or potentially replacing the independent, rigorous and accountable role of the local authority's contaminated land officer. It is wrong for DEFRA to be relying on local authorities to remediate contaminated land while cutting their funding and introducing new legislative measures that reduce their ability to act effectively.

Let me turn to soil degradation, peat lands and climate change. I was unaware before this inquiry that soil is a massive natural carbon capture and storage system. We hear a lot about CCS, but we do not actually understand that the soil around us is capturing and storing carbon all the time. It stores three times as much carbon as the atmosphere, and we want it to stay there. The UK's arable soils have seen a widespread and ongoing decline in peat soil carbon levels since the '70s. Soil degradation increases carbon emissions and contributes to climate change. Each tonne of carbon retained in soil helps us to meet our carbon budgets and slows climate change.

At the Paris conference on climate change last year, the Government pledged to increase soil carbon levels by 0.4% a year. That is a great pledge, and we welcome the ratification today of the climate change treaty, but the Government need a plan to put that pledge into action. I would like to hear from the Minister where that plan is. Without a national soil monitoring scheme to establish a baseline for the nation's soil, we will not know whether the target is met. The carbon content of soil is vital for growing food—95% of food, apart from fish. Soil degradation could mean that some of our most productive agricultural land, particularly in East Anglia, becomes unprofitable to farm within a generation.

The degradation and decline of peat bogs is particularly troubling, given that peat lands store about 40% of our soil carbon. The Government need to crack down on

land use practices that degrade peat, such as the burning and draining of bogs. I welcome the Government's commitment to publish their report on the carbon and greenhouse gas balance of low-lying peat lands in England and Wales before the end of the year. That research will fill an important knowledge gap, and the Government should use the report to accelerate and improve their peat land restoration programme.

The upcoming 25-year environment plan—we are keen to hear the latest timings for that from the Minister—should set out measurable and time-bound actions that will halt, then reverse, peat land degradation while minimising the impact on farmers. DEFRA'S single departmental plan contains £100 million for the natural environment. Will the Minister tell us how much of that money will be spent on improving soil health? I am concerned that a majority of the projects are based in upland peat land areas, whereas our report highlighted that the problem is in the lowland peat areas. They are the emissions hotspots, and that is where the Government should target their efforts.

I mentioned the need for a proper soil monitoring system. Again, because soil is earthy and dark, we do not tend to see it as something that is important to us as an ecosystem. DEFRA's ad hoc approach to soil health surveys is inadequate. We would like the Government to introduce a rolling national monitoring scheme, very similar to the one in Wales that we heard about, to ensure that we get a rich picture of our nation's soils. Data collection is a cornerstone of effective policy, because what gets measured gets done. Without a national soil monitoring scheme, we do not know whether our soils are getting healthier or sicker. Ad hoc studies are just not enough; one survey in eight years is not enough.

A proposal to undertake a repeat of the soil sampling carried out in 2007, which would cost just £156,000 a year, has been submitted to DEFRA since the release of our report. Is the Minister aware of that and does she have any comments about that proposal? Compared with the costs of monitoring air and water quality, this is very small beer, but it is a crucial platform for knowledge building. Soils receive nowhere near equal status with water, biodiversity and air.

The Government have suggested that we could use farmers' own soil analysis to monitor soil health. That is fine. That approach may provide useful additional data, but it is not a solution because it would be an unrepresentative sample. I know the Minister has a degree in these—

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** In chemistry.

**Mary Creagh:** Yes, the Minister has a degree in chemistry, so she will know about the importance of representative sampling. Such an analysis would only deal with agricultural soil, but would neglect conservation land, urban and coastal land, forests and most peat lands.

Let me turn to the cross-compliance regime. The Government's reliance on cross-compliance rules with farm payments to regulate agricultural soil health is not sufficient to meet their ambition to manage our soil sustainably by 2030. The regime is too weak. The rules are too loosely enforced and they rely only on preventing further damage to soil, rather than on promoting activity to encourage the restoration and improvement of our soils.



Crucial elements of soil health, such as soil structure and biology, are not assessed at all in the cross-compliance regime, and there is a minimal inspection regime. Two figures really illustrate the changes in the past couple of years. In 2014, there were 478 discovered breaches of the cross-compliance soil regime but in 2015, under the new common agricultural policy rules, there were just two discovered breaches of the new conditions, both on the same farm. I am pretty certain that the only reason those breaches were discovered was because there was soil run-off, which probably went into a watercourse. It was not Government inspectors, but the Environment Agency, that saw a polluting incident in a river, allowing the breach to be discovered. In theory, an outcome-based approach is fine, but we need adequate inspection and monitoring. Rules with greater scope, force and ambition are required to meet the Government's goal to manage soil sustainably by 2030.

I turn briefly to subsidies for maize production and anaerobic digestion. We heard that maize production, when managed incorrectly, also damages soil. This is not just a question for fans of "The Archers", in which Adam is trying to restore the soil structure in the face of opposition from evil Rob Titchener, who is evil not just because of what he did to Helen, but because of his approach to soil monitoring and restoration. We send Adam every good wish in his low-till approach to improving the land.

Maize production can increase flood risk and contribute to soil erosion. My Committee heard evidence that up to three quarters of a field could be sealed to—or become impervious to—rainfall in maize stubble fields over the winter, which results in the soil run-off that, as I said earlier, damages rivers. There is a very simple method to avoid that, which is roughly ploughing back in the maize stubble. If the Government could think of ways to incentivise farmers to do that, we would be only too happy to hear about them. We need effective regulation of high-risk practices.

Maize produced for anaerobic digestion receives a double subsidy: first through the CAP and then from the UK's own renewable energy incentives. That is counterproductive and has contributed to an increase in the land used for maize production. The Government's plan to restrict the subsidy for energy generated using crop-based feedstock is a move in the right direction, but it fails to prevent maize from being grown on high-risk soils. I would be grateful if the Minister set out whether she has any specific plans on that issue.

Before I finish, Mr Bone, I would like to say a few words about the referendum result, a topic that I know is very close to your heart.

**Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair):** Order. When I sit in this Chair, I have no views on anything.

**Mary Creagh:** Excellent; that is great. I shall carry on regardless, then.

Some 80% of our environmental regulations are shaped by Brussels, and soil is no exception. The European Environment Agency researches trends in European soil health and looks at how cross-cutting policy objectives impact on soil management. It is not glamorous work—getting our hands dirty never is—but it is important for member states, including the UK, working towards the European Union's target to ensure that by 2020 soil

erosion is reduced, soil organic matter is increased and remedial work is underway on contaminated sites. It is important that we are able to meet our 0.4% target to improve soil carbon capture, as we have agreed to do in the Paris agreement. As we leave the EU, it is vital that the Government maintain that target and ensure that UK agencies take over the European Environment Agency's vital work in this area.

Other Members wish to speak, so I will conclude by saying that soil is crucial to life on Earth. Neglecting soil health will damage our food security, increase climate change and damage public health. DEFRA's upcoming 25-year environment plan gives us a unique opportunity to place soil protection at the heart of our environmental policy. We must stop seeing soil just as a growth medium and treat it as a precious, fragile ecosystem in its own right—it is the Cinderella of all ecosystems.

We need a joined-up soil policy between DEFRA and the Department for Communities and Local Government in relation to planning. We are pleased that the Government have acknowledged those issues, but now we await action. We want to see specific, measurable and time-limited action to protect our soil. I commend our report to the House, and I look forward to the debate and to the Minister's response.

1.50 pm

**Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con):** I, too, am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I am also delighted to follow my Committee colleague, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), who so ably chaired our inquiry on soil. I was one of the people who persuaded her to hold the inquiry. To many people it might seem a rather odd subject to consider, but I hope that we are demonstrating that we neglect soil at our peril. Soil may not be on your top-10 list of important issues, Mr Bone, but I hope you might change your mind after hearing what we have to say this afternoon and agree that we should all give soil a much higher profile.

The hon. Lady talked about soil and soil contamination, but I will talk about soil in the wider landscape. I hope that some of the ideas in our report will gradually filter into policy, and I am confident that the Minister is listening to some of those views. I am a gardener, I grow fruits and vegetables at home, I was brought up on a mixed farm—such farms treat soil the best—and I have reported on such subjects for many years as a journalist, so I am pleased to be involved in this debate.

Soil is the stuff of life. It is as important as the water we drink and the air we breathe—they are all inextricably linked. Without healthy soils, we cannot produce healthy, sustainable food. Soil is also an important sequester of carbon, as we have already heard, and it plays an important role in climate mitigation. Until we produced our report, many people, even on our Committee, were unaware of that. Soil stores three times as much carbon as is held in the atmosphere, with peat being especially significant. Soil has an important water-cleaning function, as it helps to filter and clean the water as it drains through. Soil also holds water and slows the flow, so it also provides flood resilience. We heard all those things in our inquiry.

I am also a member of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which recently reported on flood resilience. Soil was highlighted in that

[Rebecca Pow]

report. Treating our soil well and increasing the amount of organic matter contained in it will help to hold water and slow the flow into our rivers, which will ultimately help the nation. Taking more care of the land around us would have a cost effect on the economy, because it would save us money if we did not have to react to massive flooding.

I said at the beginning that soil is the stuff of life. Soil is our lifeblood, and it is alive—many people think soil is inert, but it is not. There are more organisms in 1 gram of soil than there are human beings on the planet. Each gram of soil contains: 1 billion bacteria belonging to 10,000 different species; up to 100 invertebrates; and up to 1 km of fungal threads. A square metre of soil can contain between 30 and 300 earthworms.

**Mary Creagh:** The hon. Lady is showing what a brilliant member of the Environmental Audit Committee she has been. I slightly regret that we did not call her as a witness, instead of just as a member of the Committee, because I am learning new things, particularly about fungal threads and water filtration. This is a subject to which Parliament must return.

**Rebecca Pow:** I thank the hon. Lady so much for that intervention. I have talked to many organisations. I literally love soil. It is a fantastic subject in which we all need to get more involved. Darwin described earthworms as nature's little ploughs. We would not survive without earthworms, because they create the passageways that aerate the soil and allow it to breathe and be healthy, and that allow all the other creatures to go to and fro doing their jobs.

All those creatures are working in the topsoil, directly influencing the food we grow—there is a direct link—yet we understand only 1% of those organisms, which is unbelievable. It is an untapped area. People are getting into it, but it is still so unknown. The hon. Lady mentioned fungi. Trees could not properly uptake nutrients or water without the fungi in the soil, and we would not survive without the trees because they have such an effect on the recycling of the air and all the gases, which is even more reason to look after our soil. That brings me neatly to something I must mention—ancient trees. I am chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on ancient woodland and veteran trees. Ancient woodland is our most biodiverse habitat, but only 2% remains. Ancient woodlands are like our rain forests, and they are a wonderful microcosm of biodiversity, but with the trees we have to include the soil underneath. We should treat it all as one holistic whole.

The soil and those trees should be protected as we protect our national monuments. They are that significant. I am sure that the Minister is listening, and her predecessor was terribly interested in ancient trees. All the diverse little connections are all the more reason to protect our soil.

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** I reassure my hon. Friend that I am listening. She came to meet me not long ago for a full half-hour discussion on soil health.

**Rebecca Pow:** I am coming to that. There is a major section in my speech about our meeting, but I thank the Minister for drawing attention to it.

It is a sad scenario that brings us here today and that caused us to hold our inquiry. Soil is a finite and deteriorating resource. Soil takes a very long time to develop, as we have heard—1 cm of topsoil can take 1,000 years to form, but can be lost in a moment. Topsoil can be washed away into our waterways if the incorrect crops are grown and it is left open to water, and the carbon in the soil can evaporate into the atmosphere.

According to a UK Government report, the UK is losing 2.2 million tonnes of crucial topsoil each year, which costs the economy some £1.2 billion. That is why we must seriously consider the issue. As we have heard, some calculations say that we have only 100 harvests left in certain arable areas of the south-east of England before we cannot grow anything in the soil. We have to do something to reverse that decline.

I do not want to be completely negative. I applaud the Government in some respects, and I particularly welcome their progress on preventing the degradation of the peatlands—we have already heard about that, so I will not talk about it in great detail. I also applaud the Government on their ambition to manage soil sustainably by 2030. That was highlighted in the 2011 natural environment White Paper, but I urge the Minister to speed up the process. The situation is so serious that we need to address it now, rather than thinking, “2030 is a long time way. Let's not worry about it now.”

As we have heard, the Government signed an agreement at COP 21 to increase soil carbon by 0.4% a year. I am pleased that that is on the agenda, which I applaud. That is great, but please can we hear from the Minister about how we are pushing it forward? It is serious.

It is not all about carbon and climate change; it is really about changing how we think about soil, which is partly what this debate is about. This is the first ever UK debate on soil, and I hope that it will influence how we think about it. Let us start by treating soil as an ecosystem, not as a medium for growing stuff, because we have used and abused it—not everyone has, but it has often been treated that way—and the ethos of EU policies has been about preventing damage rather than restoring and improving the soil. Brexit provides us with an excellent opportunity to change how we approach the issue and think about how to encourage those who work the land to help restore and improve it. The Soil Association calls for organic matter to be increased on arable land by 20% in 20 years. That is quite a challenge, but we should perhaps consider it.

I come now to the issue of monitoring schemes. One of our report's main findings was that we needed a decent monitoring scheme. After all, if we do not know what is in the soil, how can we tell people what they ought to do about it? Lord Krebs led the way on climate change by means of a proper monitoring scheme, which is what triggered all the work that we have been able to do on climate change. I was delighted to discuss a soil monitoring scheme with our previous Environment Minister, who was keen on trying to get the idea into the 25-year plan. Again, I applaud the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for doing so.

I am also delighted that our new Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal, who has taken over the mantle, has shown so much interest in the subject that she has already met me for half an hour to discuss it, bringing with her lots more of the brains on her team. I was pleased—it was early in her tenure as

the new Environment Minister—and I am absolutely sure that she was listening. I would like to hear a little about where those ideas might have gone.

I remind everybody that a royal commission on environmental pollution 20 years ago recommended a monitoring scheme, so we have not come very far since then. In fairness, there is an EU soil monitoring programme, but it is done only once every eight or 10 years, and it is quite cursory. A lot of farmers will tell you that they monitor the soil, but they are monitoring mainly the chemicals in the soil—NPK, or nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium—and that needs to be broadened.

We have so much environmental expertise in this country, as we heard at our inquiry. We have got the brains, and much of the work is already being done. The Centre for Ecology and Hydrology has a scheme that it reckons it could roll out tomorrow, with not too much funding, so that we could monitor our soil as an ecosystem and look not only at the chemical content but the organic and carbon content, and all the organisms—thrips, nematodes, earthworms and all the things that I learned about at university years and years ago—that are mentioned much less than they ought to be. We could make a difference quickly.

I do not think that there should be a blame game against farmers. Many of the ways that farmers have been forced to farm have been directed by our policies of low-cost food. That is why many farmers have gone down the route of monoculture and least-cost production, and our European Community policies have encouraged that. In fairness, lots of farmers are already doing exceptionally good work.

One farmer in my constituency, Tom Morris, is a great friend. He is an organic dairy farmer who has always farmed for the soil. At the Dairy UK breakfast this week, I met a fascinating chap called Lyndon Edwards, who is also an organic farmer, from Severndale farm in Chepstow. He goes around giving workshops showcasing his good practice to other farmers, and has just been to my constituency. We should encourage a lot more of that; I think that people would be receptive to it. One suggestion is that perhaps the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, the levy board, might be able to put some emphasis on research into soil analysis, to help build up our picture.

More green cover and grass—I am a great advocate of grass—in growing rotations, more deep-rooted crops and many other simple things can be done to address the situation. We should be getting on with it. I reiterate the calls for more joined-up thinking across Departments, particularly between DEFRA and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, so that when we form our policies on crops grown for energy production, we choose crops that will not destroy the environment. Maize needs serious consideration. I am sure that the Minister is listening.

There is a massive link with well-being and the health of our soil, which links the issue to the Department of Health as well. It is important to have healthy soil and a healthy ecosystem, which basically means a healthy us. That is a no-brainer. I am heartened by the groundswell of interest in the issue. It is not just our Committee here in London; I meet many people who talk about soil, including farmers. I held an environment forum in Taunton last week on flood resilience, but the subject of soil and how better to look after it to control flooding kept coming up.

Soil should not be a Cinderella story. I will end with a final thought that might concentrate our minds. Research in the US has just discovered the first potential in 10 years for a new antibiotic. Guess where? In the soil. That should give us all plenty of food for thought. I know that the Minister, with her scientific mind, will realise how important it is. We neglect soil at our peril.

2.6 pm

**Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. It is also a delight to follow the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who made an excellent speech. She certainly educated me on a range of issues. I welcome the Environmental Audit Committee's recent report on soil health across the UK, and I commend the work by my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), who secured this important debate.

DEFRA funding for contaminated land has been vital for towns such as Rochdale. The removal of such funding seriously impairs my local council's ability to tackle this environmental problem. My community's rich industrial history has had a lasting legacy, not all of which has been positive. The former Turner Brothers Asbestos site in Spodden valley spans 30 hectares. It was the world's largest asbestos textile factory until it ceased production in the 1990s. Asbestos scourged the lives of many of the men and women who worked in the textile factory. My predecessor, Cyril Smith, who owned shares in the business, did much to protect and promote the industry even when he would have known that it was killing his constituents.

Today, Spodden valley lies barren, depriving the people of Rochdale space for recreation, services or even homes. My ideal is for the site to become an urban park, a green lung in memory of all those killed by asbestos. Whether that is possible, I am unsure; what I do know is that the site is a ticking time bomb. There are strong suggestions that asbestos was tipped on the site and still sits there in the soil. We know for a fact that many of the derelict buildings on the site contain asbestos.

Therefore, for the people of Rochdale, it is imperative that the Government take soil protection seriously and commit to properly funding the investigation and clean-up of contaminated land. The Environment Agency, the Health and Safety Executive and Public Health England also need to do more, particularly in relation to Spodden valley. Such challenges are too great for local authorities to face on their own.

In the past, Rochdale has benefited enormously from the contaminated land capital grants scheme for carrying out work required by the part 2A regime of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, which my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield mentioned. Among other sites, four former landfills in Rochdale were inspected using such funding, resulting in three determinations of contaminated land and remediation. Once again, Government funding was vital.

Now Rochdale relies on site owners to undertake voluntary inspections. We are fortunate in the case of Spodden valley that the intrusive site work inspection is being undertaken by the site owners themselves. However, we fear that that may not be the case for future sites in Rochdale, which could be left blighted for the foreseeable future as potential developers see investment as unviable.



[Simon Danczuk]

The council's estimated costs for the work on the former Turner Brothers Asbestos site are astronomical. Because of the size, history and potential complexity of the site, further investigations are needed to fill the information gaps. The council will continue to work hard to support the site owner, but we know that it simply could not afford to undertake such a monumental task all by itself. Rochdale Council, like many other local authorities throughout the country, believes that councils will struggle to meet their statutory obligations for contaminated land now that funding under part 2A of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 is being phased out. Councils are rightly expected to uphold good environmental standards but will no longer be given adequate financial support by central Government. Such requirements will become burdensome. Intrusive site investigations and comprehensive risk assessments—not to mention clean-up charges—are incredibly costly.

In this matter as in so many things, the Government are shirking their responsibilities and are punishing local authorities by demanding that they do more and more with less and less every year. In Rochdale, an area with high levels of deprivation, cuts to local government have hit hard. Services that local people depend on have been cut to the bone. The local authority simply does not have spare cash lying around. We need central Government support. Throughout the 20th century, factories in Rochdale and throughout the north-west pumped money into the Exchequer, as did their employees. Now that those industries have gone, the Government appear to be turning a blind eye to their environmental legacy and to families who live with threats from land, such as at Spodden valley.

Local authorities are having an incredibly tough time. With their shrinking budgets, it is simply impossible to expect them to pick up the extortionate bill for investigating and cleaning up contaminated land. I therefore urge the Minister to take seriously the recommendations made in the Environmental Audit Committee report.

2.11 pm

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): As ever, Mr Bone, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair. I am pleased that today we have the opportunity to discuss the importance of soil health, which is something of a Cinderella issue in environmental policy, as other hon. Members have said: it has been neglected for too long. I hope that the Environmental Audit Committee's report and today's debate will help to lift it from obscurity and give it the attention it deserves.

Some of our most productive agricultural land could become unprofitable within a generation because of soil erosion and loss of organic carbon. Soil degradation in England and Wales costs an estimated £1.2 billion per year in lost productivity, flood damage, reduced water quality and other costs. Our approach to managing our soil has to change to address those risks and as part of our strategy for tackling climate change and flooding. Any Members who visited flood-hit areas in the north of the country over Christmas will have heard from people there about the impact of soil erosion on flooding—I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) will have something to say on that point. It is one important reason why we need to address the quality of soil and to protect our soil.

I commend the Environmental Audit Committee for its excellent report. The passion with which two of its members—my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) and the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow)—have spoken today speaks volumes about how seriously they take the issue. I am now a member of the Committee; I am sorry that I was not a member when it conducted the inquiry. It is niche, perhaps, but it does really important work on fascinating topics. As a former chair of the all-party group on agroecology and a current vice-chair of the all-party group on agriculture and food for development, I am particularly interested in this topic. I commend the agroecology group's soil inquiry, which slightly preceded the work of the Environmental Audit Committee and which came to very similar conclusions.

It has to be said that the Government's response to the Committee's recommendations has been pretty weak. As well as taking them to task for that today, I know Members of both Houses will be keen to keep up the pressure on the Government after the debate. I will focus my comments on three areas: how we can better protect our best agricultural soils through the planning system and planning policy; contaminated land, which other Members have already addressed; and the need for a proper plan of action to meet the Government's laudable aim of ensuring that all soils are sustainably managed by 2030.

First, on planning, there has been a steady loss of our most fertile soils to development. The issue first came to my attention with the proposals to build a bus-only junction on prime agricultural land in and on the edges of my constituency. The site, known as the Blue Finger, consists of highly fertile food-growing soil, which is predominantly grade 1, although some peripheral areas are grade 2 and 3. Those three grades are collectively known as best and most versatile—BMV—soil. At the moment, the site is home to exemplary community food-growing projects, such as "Feed Bristol", and to allotments. Unfortunately, the construction work is now going ahead, but I campaigned against it with my community because my view is that BMV land ought to be used for growing food, not concreted over.

The protection given to BMV land has been slowly weakened, most recently as a result of changes to the national planning policy framework in March 2012. Although planning practice guidance supports space for growing food, the national planning policy framework does not specifically include local food growing, which tends to mean that local plans do not include it either. When I raised that issue in a Westminster Hall debate that I secured in March last year, the then Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), assured me that she would look at changes to planning regulations to see how we could better protect high-quality food-growing land. I understand that the NPPF is likely to be amended in the next few months; I would be grateful if the Minister spoke to her colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government and tried to persuade them of the need to include protection of our best soil in planning policy. It is too often overlooked.

Secondly, on contaminated land, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) on highlighting how important the issue is to his

constituency. I was genuinely disappointed that the Government's response to the Committee did not even acknowledge, let alone accept responsibility for, the compelling evidence about the impact of withdrawing the capital grant scheme for carrying out remediation work to contaminated land. That means that local authorities will be less likely to identify contaminated sites so they are not burdened with the costs of remediation, especially since, as the report strongly makes clear, 81% of part 2A remediation has depended on funding from the capital grant scheme, and less than 2% is remediated through other public funding. It is simply not credible for the Government to claim that support for part 2A work

"remains in the form of the Revenue Support Grant", when in reality that grant has rarely been made available for such work.

I received a similar response from the Government to my written question about the management of more than 1,000 old landfill sites on the coasts of England and Wales. According to recent research commissioned by the Environment Agency, those sites are at increasing risk of being breached by coastal erosion, which could result in toxic pollutants leaching into the local environment and bathing water. The response of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was that that "is a matter for local authorities".

It is true that the statutory duty to remediate contaminated land lies with local authorities, but DEFRA's failure to acknowledge councils' reliance on that funding for that work is far too complacent, especially for poorer areas where contamination is less likely to be remediated through the planning system. I would like to hear the Minister's thoughts on the safety of those sites and whether she is reassured that everything is being done to minimise the risk to the environment and public health in the future.

Thirdly, I would like to focus on the report's recommendation that the Government set out their plan of action for increasing soil carbon levels. In their response to the Committee, the Government detailed existing guidance and good practice for protecting peatlands, but the damaging practice of burning on upland peat persists. The Committee on Climate Change found that "the majority of upland areas with carbon-rich peat soils...are in poor condition"

and that 27% of upland peats are regularly burned.

In the Westminster Hall debate on driven grouse shooting a couple of weeks ago, I raised the fact that grouse moors are the only places in England with Natural England's permission to burn blanket bog on special areas of conservation, even though they receive EU environmental stewardship money for restoring those important sites. Sadly, in responding to that debate, the Minister did not provide much reassurance, other than to unnecessarily clarify that the payments are not paid to support shooting activities, which was not the point I was making, and to say that the Government

"will continue to work with moor owners and stakeholders to further improve management practices and peat condition."—[*Official Report*, 31 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 276WH.]

I hope that we see much tougher action by the Government to tackle land use practices that degrade peat.

The Government's response was also notably weak on action to address loss of carbon from lowland, drained peat, which, as the Soil Association says, is

equivalent to the emissions from all buses in the UK. I hope the Minister will reassure us that she considers lowland peat used for agriculture to be as much of a priority as upland peat. Will she ensure that measures to drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions targeted at lowland peat areas will be included in the 25-year plans?

After visiting Avalon marshes in Somerset fairly recently, I tabled some written questions to the Department about peat works in the UK and their licences. My first question was to ask

"how many peat works the Government has bought out in each of the last five years; and how much the Government spent on buying out peat works in each of the last five years."

The Minister's response was that one licence had been bought out, which rather surprised me because, when he gave evidence to the Select Committee, the former Environment Minister, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), said:

"We have spent considerable sums of money buying out peat works",

which I thought implied that there might have been more than one.

As understand it, there are currently 29 valid peat extraction licences, all of which expire by 2042, which clearly is some way off in the distance. Are there any plans to try to buy out any more of the licences so that we can protect the peatland in the intervening years?

**Rebecca Pow:** I wanted to ask not about licensing but about the Avalon marshes. They are managed by the Somerset Wildlife Trust, which does some excellent work on peatland restoration. Will the hon. Lady comment on how valuable that is and how we ought to showcase more of it? As a vice-president of the Somerset Wildlife Trust, I really feel it deserves some credit.

**Kerry McCarthy:** I am happy to join the hon. Lady in congratulating the trust for that work. I visited the marshes with the Heritage Lottery Fund, which is working to discover what has been preserved by the peat going back many centuries. That aspect of my trip was fascinating, as was looking at the biodiversity associated with peatland. As I was travelling there, I spotted peat works in the area, which led me to ask how much peat is still being commercially extracted and whether, given the wonderful restoration work that is being done in the Avalon marshes, we should be trying to protect some more of it and buying up some of the licences.

**Rebecca Pow:** On that point, I know that those in the horticultural industry are working closely together and that the use of peat—that was the main user—has declined dramatically. It is an important issue, but it is very much being tackled by the horticultural industry from that end as well, which I applaud.

**Kerry McCarthy:** I agree. Action is being taken, but although I could not get a firm answer from the Department, which said that data on peat extraction licences are not held centrally, Natural England estimates that there are currently 29 valid peat extraction licences. Five of those licences will expire before 2020; six more will expire by 2030; another four will expire by 2040; and the remaining 14 will expire in 2042. That is quite a lot of peat extraction between now and 2040. I obviously do not have the data on what areas of land are covered; it is all a little vague, which is why I would like the

[Kerry McCarthy]

Minister to look into it. The way to tackle the issue is to try to buy out the licences so that the commercial activities do not go ahead. It should be on the record that I would like to see that done.

On the broader issue of carbon in the soil, there is already evidence out there. As Peter Melchett from the Soil Association said to the Select Committee:

“how you get carbon back into the soil is fairly settled science”.

We need a commitment that shows that the Government have fully embraced the need to act on that science. It is welcome that at an event last month the Secretary of State spoke of her own personal commitment to implementing the global “4 per 1000” soil carbon initiative. It is also welcome that the Government have confirmed that measures to increase soil organic matter will be reflected in the 25-year environment plan, but I hope there will be more than just a token reference to soil, and that the plan will set out the

“specific, measureable and time-limited actions”

to increase soil carbon levels by 0.4% per year that the Select Committee recommended.

The protection of agricultural soils should also, of course, be in the other 25-year plan—the food and farming plan. In fact, this illustrates the absurdity of the Government’s decision to have two completely separate plans. It is not possible to separate farming from the natural environment on which it depends and the rural communities that sustain it. It is unwise to look at food and farming purely from an economic, money-making viewpoint and nothing more, particularly if the focus in the food and farming plan on growing more, buying more and selling more British food ends up promoting further intensification, which would lead to more pressure on soils, not to mention more pressure on water and biodiversity, and increased greenhouse gas emissions. We will all end up paying the costs. The Minister will probably say that efforts are being made to cross-reference the two 25-year plans, but I stick by my original views that the issues ought to be incorporated into one report.

The Committee on Climate Change has said that, for the UK to meet the targets in the Climate Change Act 2008, a 15% reduction in agricultural emissions is needed by 2032. That will be achieved in part by action to prevent the degradation of our carbon-rich soils, about which we have already heard from other Members. Will the Minister say whether emissions from agriculture will be included in the Government’s emissions reduction plans? Will the food and farming plan set out how agriculture will deliver its sectoral share of responsibility for reducing carbon emissions?

Other Members have touched on reform to the common agricultural policy. I hope we will also hear today about the Government’s priorities for our agricultural policy framework once we leave the EU, to ensure that in future farm payments are better invested in public goods, from soil health to wildlife and water quality. In drawing up their plans, I hope the Government look to some of the great examples of best practice and forward thinking by UK farmers and growers on restoring our soils, including agroecological approaches.

As we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield, there is currently quite a debate going on in “The Archers”. People will know of Adam’s struggles

in trying to improve the long-term fertility of his soil, with his plans looking increasingly likely to be overturned by his land managers, on the advice of the evil Rob Titchener, who has been mentioned already. The previous Environment Minister, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border, told the Select Committee that the primary incentive for farmers to protect their soils is that it is good for their farm business, as healthy soils are the bedrock of future production—indeed, we heard from the hon. Member for Taunton Deane that we will reach a point where there will be no more harvests, at least in some parts of the country, if we do not protect soil.

As the report says, the benefits of soil health are not always felt by those maintaining it, and the costs of soil degradation are mostly borne by others, from water companies to those living downstream at greater risk of flooding. Adam’s new farming methods are making Borchester Land uneasy. It has been too easy for Rob to paint Adam’s methods as a bit faddish, hippy-ish and self-indulgent, as opposed to his facing the hard-headed economic realities of farming. I hope that, as well as in the other 25-year plan, the Government really seize the chance in the food and farming plan and say that it is not unfriendly towards business to look at agroecological approaches. We need to be protecting soil as one of our most precious resources. It is that that will protect the future productivity of farming, as well as protecting our countryside.

**Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair):** Before I call Mike Weir to speak for the Scottish National party, I am not sure: are we sub judice on some of the events in Borchester, or has that case passed?

**Kerry McCarthy:** Events involving the evil Rob Titchener?

**Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair):** Yes.

**Kerry McCarthy:** I think Helen was acquitted at the trial, so his evilness is in no doubt and we can put it on the record.

2.29 pm

**Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP):** I am very happy to appear under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Bone, and to learn so much about what is happening in “The Archers”.

I should perhaps start by declaring an interest, because, like the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), I am a keen gardener. I am an organic gardener and from that I understand the necessity for healthy soil; it is only with a healthy soil that it is possible to have healthy plants, particularly fruit and vegetables. However, healthy soil is not only the growing medium, as she rightly said, but extends the biodiversity and the species in a garden. I have many species of birds in my garden. In fact, at times I think that the entire species of Spuggies and Brechin lives in my garden, because there are so many of them there; for the non-Scots, that is house sparrows.

It is important that we get this right, because if we do not have healthy soil there will be an impact on food production and on species. Later, I will say something about the carbon in the soil.



In introducing the very good report by the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) made the valuable point that the report is not just about soil as such, as a growing medium, but about soil that has been contaminated as a result of things that have happened in the past, which was a point made very powerfully by the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) in referring to the Turner Brothers factory. However, it is not just in post-industrial landscapes that such contamination is a problem. Even in my area, there are old buildings that have had industrial or farming uses and that are full of asbestos and various other contaminants.

There are also problems with former Ministry of Defence facilities, because in many periods, specifically in the immediate post-war period, old aircraft were dismantled and waste was put into pits and similar things. For example, Dalgety Bay in Fife has had an ongoing and serious problem with radioactivity from some of the machinery that was dumped just off the coast. Also, much machinery was buried on old military bases throughout the country.

One of the problems is a lack of record-keeping. It is sometimes very difficult to know what contaminants are actually on these sites, which makes it extremely difficult to clean them up for agricultural or development purposes. There is no easy answer to that problem, and I appreciate that it is not the current Government's fault that in the 1940s and early 1950s records were not necessarily kept, or that records from that time have since been lost. Also, sometimes the difficulties in this regard were not fully appreciated. Nevertheless, we have to deal with that situation now, because soil is so important; indeed, it is increasingly important to us.

The hon. Member for Taunton Deane made a very powerful speech about the necessity for good soil. I specifically liked one point she made, namely, that soil is not an innate substance. I do not know if she has read the excellent book, "The Running Hare: The secret life of farmland", which I understand recently topped the bestselling list. It is a fascinating book about someone who is trying to regenerate a piece of farmland—a couple of acres—with natural resources, in order to bring back hares, which have disappeared from many parts of modern farmland.

One of the things that the author does first is to dig a square metre in a field to discover how many earthworms are within it and to compare the number with that of neighbouring farmland. Of course, because the land has been chemically farmed, there are very few earthworms. One of the things that happens in the book is that earthworms come back. In turn, that leads to hares coming back; without giving away too much of the plot, they do come back. However, other animals are also brought in, including smaller animals and birds, and birds of prey, and the farmland is regenerated as a result. Throughout the book, the author compares his farmland to the neighbouring farmland, which he refers to, perhaps unkindly, as the land of "the Chemical Brothers", who are not doing what he does. The book is interesting in showing how relatively simple changes can bring about a substantial difference to farmland.

**Rebecca Pow:** I am so pleased that the hon. Gentleman is highlighting this point. I have not read that book, but I know about it and will now read it. It makes the case

for the call for the monitoring scheme to include much more than just chemicals; we should even count the earthworms in a quadrat of soil. He is making a very powerful point.

**Mike Weir:** I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. It is a very good point and what she has suggested should be done.

**Mary Creagh:** I wanted to ask the hon. Gentleman about hares, which are one of our most iconic native species. I have just seen that there is a close season on hunting hares in Scotland, but I am not aware that we have a close season for hares in England and Wales. That is problematic, because we had a target to restore the hare population to 1990 levels, and that target has consistently been missed. So will he join me in calling on the Minister to consider the need for a close season on hares in England and Wales?

**Mike Weir:** The hon. Lady has made her point. I think the Minister might object to a Scottish MP calling for a close season on hares in England when we have one in Scotland already. Nevertheless, I am sure the Minister has heard her point.

Much of this issue in Scotland is a devolved matter, but, as has been mentioned, the UK Government have signed up to a scheme, COP 21, to increase soil carbon levels by 0.4% per year. Obviously, there will have to be work with the devolved Administrations to achieve that, since all of them have their own separate schemes.

In Scotland, we recognise that soil is a valuable but vulnerable national asset that requires sustainable and effective management. Although we have talked a lot today about farming, this issues goes much further. In Scotland, as well as farming and food production we have forestry and tourism, which are important and rely on a good natural environment, including a good soil structure. So, throughout the economy, soil is important and we should not just look at it as a purely farming matter; we must expand the areas that we are considering.

I think that it was the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) who mentioned flooding, saying how soil management also plays an important role in sustainable flood management. Within the common agricultural policy schemes that are currently operating, at least in Scotland, there is an attempt to persuade farmers to take flooding into account in their farming methods, particularly by leaving flood plains in the areas immediately next to rivers and by not building on those flood plains. Often, when flood plains are built on, there is a problem as floodwater is pushed further down the river. In my area, we have probably expended millions of pounds on flood defences to deal with that problem, because when there are changes in farming practices, sometimes the floodwater is pushed further down the river, causing problems that then have to be dealt with by other methods.

Mention was also made of peatlands. Peatlands constitute a third of Scotland's soil and they provide many economic, environmental and cultural ecosystems, as well as being important habitats for our wildlife. As far as carbon is concerned, it has been estimated that in Scotland's peatlands the soil contains 3,000 megatonnes of carbon, which is equivalent to nearly 200 times the net annual

[Mike Weir]

greenhouse gas emissions. That shows the importance of soil for climate change and in particular the importance of peatlands.

The Scottish Government are seeking to maintain soil carbon in place, but we have to bear it in mind that there is always a conflict about some of these things. For example, renewable energy infrastructure—wind farms, for instance—is often built in areas that are less accessible, and often that is peatland or similar land. There is an offset if we have these renewable energies and clearly we are saving carbon, but at the same time there is a cost to them and we should not lose sight of that cost. The Committee's report says:

“Current policy aims to minimise losses while facilitating development which delivers economic growth that does not entail disproportionate carbon costs.”

I reiterate that there is a cost and we must find ways of offsetting it.

Also, earlier I made the point about species. One of the things that is being done to support peatland restoration is to provide funding through the rural priorities scheme of the Scottish Rural Development Programme. Some landowners, such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, have carried out restoration on their land, which, in the case of the RSPB, is mostly to do with wildlife but none the less has an important effect on greenhouse gas emissions and on ensuring that carbon is maintained in the soil. Restoration also has side effects. For example, it leads to other species growing. In many cases there is a regrowth of sphagnum moss and the resumption of carbon sequestration.

To sum up, this issue is not just about farming; there is an economic impact on all our rural areas. One thing that worries me—I am sure the Minister will not say too much about it—is farming payments. In Scotland at least, we have been trying to push much of the farming subsidy towards more environmental means to try to ensure the future. If it should come to pass that we leave the European Union, there will have to be a major realignment of farming payments. I urge the Minister and the devolved Administrations to look at the environmental benefits and how they will be maintained in a post-EU world, should that unfortunate calamity come to pass.

2.41 pm

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Bone. I start by thanking the Environmental Audit Committee for the rigour with which it has conducted its inquiry. It has produced an excellent, evidence-based report. The Government should take heed of its warnings and embrace its solutions. The qualities and properties of our soils are so finely balanced, as we have heard this afternoon. Our understanding of that has led in the past to the degradation of soil and peat bog erosion in the lowlands and the highlands, and it has had a wider impact on biodiversity, natural habitats, and flooding and water management. It now presents issues around public health, climate change and food security. The call for an effective plan with clear targets, which my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) made at the last Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions and again in her speech today, is the issue of today's debate.

Before I move on, I must mention the fascinating speech of the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). It reminded me of David Bellamy in my youth talking about soil, and the interest he created in me. She was right, as were other speakers, to talk about the enthusiasm with which farmers talk about this agenda. They are changing their practices to see better quality soil.

The Paris agreement has set the pace for the world on how we need to address the matter. The cap on temperature rises—it is frightening to see a 1.5 °C rise in global temperatures—will determine how we farm our land. With a 1 °C rise in temperature, we could see a 30% loss in peat. Without action, we could see half of our peat depleted. Likewise, we are losing 2.2 million tonnes of soil each year in the UK, but it takes 100 years to grow back just 1 cm of top soil. Action is needed now to ensure that we have sustainable soils by 2030. I have heard that with current farming techniques, much of our land has only 30 harvests left due to the depletion in soil quality. That puts our food security back under the spotlight. We have not seen the action that we would expect since the signing by Sir David King at COP 21 of the agreement to move forward on this issue. We have had a wasted year.

I have read the Government's response to the Environmental Audit Committee's work, and it is worrying. There is too much dependency on voluntary codes that are not delivering the required change for carbon sequestration back into our soils, particularly in the lowland peatlands. We are told that the answers will be found in plans yet to see the light of day. My concern is that we need a framework now. That will ensure that we restore soil health in a comprehensive, managed way. How will the Government monitor soils comprehensively? What will the drivers be to re-carbonise soils? What year-on-year targets will the Government set to ensure that they fulfil their obligations? Even the Committee on Climate Change is worried about the Government's dependency on a narrow agenda to reach anywhere near what is needed.

Members have mentioned many good examples of farming practices, including changing crop mixes, planting grasses, using green manures, investing in agro-forestation schemes, moving to organic farming and using winter cover crops to secure the soil. There have been good examples of re-wetting peatland in the lowlands. That is so important in the fens, where peats are rapidly drying. We have to look at the agenda, but we also have to question why any form of burning or draining soils continues. We heard about that in the grouse moor shooting debate a couple of weeks back. Surely it is time for action to be taken.

We also need a proper analysis of the state of our soil. We have heard how Wales has put a progressive, systematic process in place. The Committee's report has drawn that out as best practice. We would be wise to follow the actions of Labour's initiative, which uses a tiny proportion of rural payments to undertake the work.

I was struck by what Professor Chris Collins said in the report. He talked about the need to define what we mean by “soil health”. He said:

“There needs to be clear policy direction, evidence based, that defines what soil health is, and critically the measure to be used to evaluate it.”

It is so important that we put those things in place.

The report also draws out the need to link monitoring to other important biodiversity measures, such as fauna, micro-diversity and soil structure. While ad hoc data gathering from farmers' soil testing regimes could add to data, its methodology is not scientific enough to provide the necessary data, so I hope the Government will look again at that. Accurate auditing leads to effective mitigation planning and interventions. That leads me to ask the Minister, how will her Government implement a programme to see a 0.4% annual increase in soil carbon levels? How will she help farmers to achieve that? How will she assist some farmers to go even further? What interventions will the Government make to ensure that that happens? Specific timelines are needed now, not just warm words.

When will we be able to see the UK peatland strategy? I know that we have seen delay with the 25-year plans that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) says should be co-joined. When will the strategy come to light? What measures will be in the peatland plan in particular to ensure that lowland peat is restored and is performing its vital role in carbon retention?

The report was published before the referendum, so I want to ask the Minister about the steps the Government will take on leaving the EU to assist farmers in making the transition to improved soil management, perhaps by converting to organic farming. Will they have access to the five-year conversion and maintenance payments, in the light of the fact that we could have left the EU by 2019? If there is no certainty over the next couple of years, the Government are unlikely to see many applications for transition. What future support will they provide for those in transition now? What sticks and carrots will they make available to make the necessary changes in the future? Answers are needed, because farmers are making choices for their futures now.

The three good statutory management requirements used for cross-compliance have failed to provide the necessary incentive to drive soil quality improvement. It is clear that the scheme has failed to properly audit farms, and there are loopholes in the system. What will the Minister's priorities be in replacing that part of the rural development programme? As we have heard, we also need to examine the impact of anaerobic digestion. I will not go further into that debate due to the time, but I want to mention the issue of offsetting floods. Soil has so many important qualities in achieving that, so it is important that we also examine it as part of flood management.

I also want to touch on the issue of contaminated land, not least because my constituency was drawn out in the plan and because the funding is inadequate in the light of the contaminated land capital grants being removed. There are a number of contaminated sites in my constituency. They are some of the biggest development sites in the whole of Europe. We heard from the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) how important that is, and I was enlightened by what the hon. Member for Angus (Mike Weir) said about Ministry of Defence sites, particularly as my local barracks has also been listed for closure and may not be suitable for development. It is so important that we support local authorities in their objectives to ensure that they deal with contamination, and put the proper funding in place.

I have asked a number of questions today but we know how important soil is and how important it is to put funding behind that. Most important of all, we are

living through an environmental crisis. Soil is a precious element and therefore it is incumbent on Parliament to make sure that we get the right soil health strategy in place now.

2.50 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for this debate, Mr Bone, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), the chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, on securing this debate through the Liaison Committee. We have heard some eloquent and passionate speeches, some particularly well informed, such as that from my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). I hope that I will be able to cover most of the questions, if not all of them, during my contribution.

Soil is a finite resource and it must be protected. The Government recognise that good soil health is essential, not least for the range of benefits it provides, including food production, biodiversity, carbon storage and flood protection. The benefits derived from healthy soil are many and they have a very important role to play. It is for those reasons that the protection and sustainable management of our soils is integral to our thinking in the 25-year environment plan and the 25-year food, farming and fisheries plan.

We have already begun to engage with key soil experts to develop best practice for managing and monitoring our soils, and that will increase as part of our engagement for the 25-year environment plan. We hope to publish the framework for that before the end of this year, and the full plan in 2017.

A hare has been set running, and I am pleased to say to the hon. Member for Wakefield that, according to Professor McDonald's report, the hare population is recovering in England. It is admittedly not at historic levels, but the recovery is nevertheless under way. One of the reasons for not having a close season in England is that breeding happens throughout the year and is highly variable across the country. In the east of England, they tend to be seen as a pest because there are so many. In the west, there are hardly any to be seen. So that is part of the answer.

The hare that is running is that there are only 100 harvests left. I have asked my officials to look at that claim before. The research did not look at how many harvests soil could support. The statement is believed to have come from a PR firm looking at the work from the research group that showed that there are about 100 to 350 years of mineable rock phosphate left. That shows how sometimes a good statistic does not necessarily have all the evidence behind it.

As has been discussed extensively, the Government did recognise in their response to the Committee's inquiry that the planning process is the main driver for dealing with land contamination issues. I recognise that some hon. Members do not feel that that is enough. I want to point out that local enterprise partnership funding is helping the clean-up of a contaminated tar works on the Tyne and in Merseyside, and that 120 acres of contaminated land is being reclaimed as part of a LEP-funded development. The UK's risk-based approach ensures that the protection of health and the environment



[*Dr Thérèse Coffey*]

is balanced with the need to enable development and we also promote the use for development of brownfield sites over agricultural land. I will follow up with the Department for Communities and Local Government on the points raised by the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy).

We recognise that there will be sites that will not be developed that may still pose some level of risk. In those instances, it is clear that the responsibility is with the local authorities, which identify contaminated land in their areas and ensure that risk to human health and the environment is dealt with. They must also identify who is liable for the cost of clean-up and rigorously pursue those deemed responsible. In response to the point made by the hon. Member for Angus (Mike Weir), if the Ministry of Defence is still in charge of the land to which he referred, I am sure that the Scottish Government, to which of course this issue is devolved, know whom to pursue.

Local authorities have the responsibility of deciding the priority given to contaminated land. I would like to commend Wakefield Council, which has committed £750,000 over five years to the investigation and clean-up of contaminated land. In our reply to the report, we committed to determining whether any local authorities were unable to respond to the two most recent surveys. My officials have found that 14 did not do so and we will be investigating the reasons why. No impact assessment has been undertaken.

The hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) spoke passionately about a particular site. I understand that he met my predecessor to discuss the issue and it was agreed that he would speak to Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs officials again, once a site report was available. That offer still stands, but I do not believe that the Department has been contacted.

On soil carbon and climate change, the Secretary of State reaffirmed this Government's support for the Paris initiative at a climate friendly landscape meeting hosted by the Prince of Wales's International Sustainability Unit on 26 October. Of course, we must use methods appropriate to our local environmental conditions. Opportunities are limited for most UK soil types to increase carbon stores, except for peatland, of which the United Kingdom has a high proportion. Our focus is therefore their restoration, both through Government funding such as in the Dark Peak nature improvement area and Humberhead peatlands restoration, and through supporting private sector initiatives, such as the Peatland code, to provide businesses with tools and opportunities to invest in nature. We are also supporting the horticulture sector to work towards the removal of peat use in horticulture.

On upland peat, we are committed to continuing to work with moor owners and stakeholders to further improve management practices and peat condition. The Blanket Bog restoration strategy uses an outcome-focused approach and is working to ensure that we have site restoration plans on a site-by-site basis. I think we all agree that dry, degraded peat is not in anyone's interest and that is why we have been working with the International Union for Conservation of Nature to develop a UK peatland strategy. I am pleased to say that that went out

for consultation yesterday. We will provide more detail in due course on how we plan to implement that strategy in England; officials are already working on it.

Some £100 million of capital funding is being invested directly in projects to support the natural environment, including the restoration of peatlands. That figure has not been split up and I do not have a figure for soil health—I am not aware that it has been identified in that sort of way—but it is fair to say that, when we finally have the 25-year environment plan, that will help us to target the resource to the right places.

There has been one peatland buyout. It is not considered to be part of our strategy going forward, but lowland peat will also be considered in the England peat strategy in due course.

We agree that it is important to monitor soil trends, but we need to ensure that we use available public funds cost-effectively. Most soil properties change very slowly over time and soil monitoring is expensive; monitoring is not justified over periods of less than five years. That is why we are looking to innovative methods of gathering the data needed to obtain a strategic picture of soil health, including remote sensing photography using drones and caesium-137 radionuclide as a tracer of non-visible soil erosion.

In the Government's response, we referred to the potential for using farmer data. I recognise what the hon. Member for Wakefield said about whether that is representative and the need to mention peat and the coastal land. People do farm on the coast of course, but I will reflect on what she said.

Traditionally, soil monitoring has been carried out by expensive one-off monitoring events. The last countryside survey cost around £10 million. An alternative option would be to have a rolling programme of monitoring, where a subset of sites are monitored each year. The approach in Wales was mentioned. The agri-land in Wales is considerably smaller than that of England and extrapolating that would cost a very high sum indeed, but we do have an ambitious research programme that is exploring how we can improve our understanding of soil condition resilience, in collaboration with the research councils, and we are looking to review our knowledge gaps. The review is still being looked at to assess its findings, but we have set up the Sustainable Intensification Platform, which will study what can be done to improve both the productivity and sustainability of the farming system.

On the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology's proposal that will cost around £150,000 a year, my understanding is that that is only the cost for chemical properties and does not include the cost for measuring earthworms, which my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane thought we should do.

On cross-compliance and future agricultural policy, we introduced new standards in the 2015 to 2020 cap and it is too early to assess whether they are having the intended impact. It is critical to say that any future agricultural policy framework will absolutely have the environment at its heart. It is not just about not compromising soil health; we must look to enhance it.

It would be difficult to publish our plan by the end of the year, but I assure hon. Members that the intention of this Government is to have a smooth Brexit. Operability is the key focus of my officials at the moment. With regards to the emissions reduction plan, DEFRA officials

are running scenarios, including on peatland and salt marsh, to see how that can be part of the plan. I am due to meet the Minister for Climate Change and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), to discuss that this month.

I could say more about protecting water quality. There are some new rules that we have consulted on and we are considering those responses carefully. We may well be drawing up secondary legislation to bring that into effect. I assure hon. Members that a series of measures are happening through the countryside stewardship scheme, which I hope will help farmers to do their bit to improve the soil health that they have.

On maize subsidies, the hon. Member for Wakefield will be aware that we are not the lead Department, but the proposed feedstock restrictions will help to deliver our objectives of waste management and low-carbon energy and we are discouraging new anaerobic digestion plants that intend to use a high proportion of feed or feed crops. That is why we are looking to restrict or eliminate payments for biogas derived from crops.

In conclusion, the benefits derived from healthy soil are many. Farmers work hard to maximise their production and we do want to ensure that that is not at the expense of soil health.

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No.10(6)).*

## Post Office

### BACKBENCH BUSINESS

[PHIL WILSON *in the Chair*]

3 pm

**Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the future of the Post Office.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I am pleased to secure this important debate on the crisis in the Post Office. First, I must declare an interest: my constituency Labour party has a formal agreement with the Communication Workers Union, which provides financial support, and I am a member of the union.

The Post Office is inflicting severe cuts. Its cost-cutting measures are affecting both its employees and the public it serves. Some 59 post offices are being closed or franchised, and the Post Office's defined benefit pension scheme is being terminated. That has all come about as a direct consequence of the separation of the Post Office from Royal Mail when Royal Mail was privatised. Cuts to Post Office funding followed, and the Government failed to deliver on their 2010 promise to turn it into a "genuine Front Office for Government" and to grow its financial services.

This is a matter of serious concern. Trends in the Post Office's traditional work and the lack of a proper strategy for growing new revenue mean it will not have a secure long-term future, or possibly a long-term future at all. It cannot survive simply by imposing cuts and going through further cost-cutting regimes. The Government must stop the cuts—particularly the proposed closures and franchising—and bring together stakeholders, including the Post Office itself, trade unions, and industry and customer representatives to develop a meaningful and convincing plan for the future.

**Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. WHSmith is now operating more than 100 post office branches. Does he agree that the franchising operation means that the Post Office is losing experienced staff, providing poorer service and offering a smaller range of services? For example, the closure of the Crown post office in my constituency means that the biometric enrolment service is no longer offered.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. In fact, later in my speech, I am going to say more or less what she just said. I thank her for reinforcing that point.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (The Cotswolds) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this really important debate. Does he agree that, as a result of its decoupling from Royal Mail in 2013, the Post Office has lacked an overall strategy? It should now be rethinking its whole enterprise, which should be one of growth, rather than one of contraction.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman. What is happening is the opposite of that, so I want the Government to put their weight behind the Post Office to enlarge, expand and improve it.

**Albert Owen** (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I concur with everything the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) said. Many communities across the country—particularly rural communities—are suffering bank closures and financial seclusion in addition to the closure of Crown offices, which are the backbone of the Post Office. We need expansion, and we need it now.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** I agree. It is vital that rural communities, in particular, have public services, sometimes on a smaller scale, to ensure that people living in more dispersed communities have proper access to those services.

**Anna Turley** (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is being extremely generous in giving way so early in his speech. I want to follow up the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) made about financial services. The post office in France set up La Banque Postale, which has made £1 billion of profit, and the CWU is campaigning for our Post Office to emulate it. It should look at expanding into financial services as a means of increasing value.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** My hon. Friend, too, has anticipated something I am going to say in my speech. That just reinforces what I am going to say, so I am pleased about that.

The Government, bending to pressure and concerns from inside and outside Parliament, have just launched a consultation document, but it must lead to genuine action. It must not simply be a token exercise that does not change thinking in the Government and the Post Office. We need effective action to promote a long-term and successful future for the Post Office.

The Post Office's current funding package runs out in March 2018 and must be replaced by an effective strategy and support for the future. The negotiations between the Government and the Post Office must not be simply a ritual seeking in reality just to manage decline. For customers, the most significant measures taken this year are the two announced tranches of Crown office closures and franchises, which followed an earlier programme affecting 50 Crown post offices in 2014-15.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) mentioned franchising. Independent research carried out in the past five years found that franchises left to WHSmith in 2007 and 2008 perform poorly—worse than Crown post offices in queue times, service times, customer service and advice, disabled access and the number of counter positions. That brings to mind the failure by railway franchises to measure up to the five-year record of success when the east coast main line was returned temporarily to the public sector. Franchises have also seen losses of experienced staff, fewer specialised staff and less space.

**Mr David Winnick** (Walsall North) (Lab): The Post Office made an attempt to close Willenhall Crown post office in my constituency, but there was a successful campaign against the closure and it decided after a while to drop its plans. It is now going to start all over again. The closure will have a most adverse effect on the local community, in which the Post Office has so far shown absolutely no interest. It is obviously tremendously disappointing. I am very pleased indeed that my hon. Friend has initiated this debate.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** My hon. Friend demonstrates the point: we need to put pressure on the Government and the Post Office at both a national level and in local campaigns if we are going to save the Post Office for our communities and its staff.

For employees, good jobs have been replaced by insecure employment. In 2014-15, only 10 out of 400 staff from former Crown offices were TUPE-ed over to new retailers. Public money was used to pay off long-term staff so the franchisees could employ more low-paid, less experienced staff with less job security—effectively, a taxpayer subsidy to the private franchisees. All that amounts to a failed strategy for the Post Office.

**Mary Creagh:** On that point, if a member of staff is TUPE-ed over, they could end up managed by somebody on the minimum wage in a WHSmith, even if they are on a significantly higher salary. That creates difficulties and tensions in the workforce in the new environment.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** My hon. Friend makes a good point. The union and I support the idea of having proper pay for all staff so that sort of discrimination and inequality does not occur. All staff should be TUPE-ed over as they wish. They should not just be bought off with public money to enable WHSmith to make more profit.

**Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. This is a big issue in my constituency, in which Blackfriars Road and Walworth Road Crown post offices are set to be franchised. Does he think that the fact that the incomes and pensions of the current staff are being put at risk completely undermines the commitment that the Prime Minister made at the Conservative conference to a more responsible capitalism?

**Kelvin Hopkins:** I will come on to talk about the fact that the Post Office is abandoning its defined benefit pension scheme. That should be resisted and opposed.

The Government said that they would keep the Post Office in public ownership when they privatised the profitable Royal Mail, but franchising to private retailers is not public ownership. The public interest has been put at risk while Royal Mail is paying out more than £220 million a year in dividends. The Post Office's revenues are falling, the "Front Office for Government" plan never actually got off the ground and Government funding is reducing.

I have a number of suggestions for the way forward. First, discussions about the Post Office's future must be subject to parliamentary scrutiny and approval. Secondly, the Post Office must commit to making no threats of compulsory redundancy. Thirdly, the Government must deliver on their pledge to make the Post Office a "Front Office for Government" and set up a UK Post Office bank. Fourthly, the Government should stop using public money to subsidise the outsourcing of Post Office services to retailers. Fifthly, the plan to close the defined benefit pension scheme should be abandoned; the scheme has a surplus of £130 million at the moment. Sixthly, the Post Office must be required to use the remaining Crown post offices to drive the growth of the new services and to give a secure future for the whole post office network.



The Post Office must remain as a vital public service and a community resource for the long term, with secure jobs and good terms and conditions for all its employees. My own preference is that a future Labour Government should bring Royal Mail back into public ownership and create a comprehensive integrated postal industry using internal cross-subsidies where necessary and appropriate. I imagine that may be expecting too much of the present Tory Government, but it would undoubtedly be massively popular with the public and serve us all well for the long term.

3.10 pm

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am delighted to catch your eye, Mr Wilson, in this very important debate. I pay great tribute to the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), who secured the debate today. News of any organisation looking at the closure or franchising of 59 Crown post offices with a projected loss of 2,000 jobs should rightly be met with horror, as the hon. Gentleman described. This reduction in operations can only mean a worse service for customers, longer queues, fewer staff, worse disabled access and the loss of a crucial community asset. I am sure many hon. Members are here today because of a threatened closure in their own constituency and, sadly, I am no different. As the MP for one of the largest rural constituencies in the country, having easy access to the services that a post office provides is an utter necessity. Since 2000, the number of rural post offices has decreased by about 3,000. Likewise, the number of Crown post offices—the larger branches that have more services—has dropped by 1,200 in the past 25 years.

The largest town and principal economic and commercial hub in my constituency is Cirencester. Its branch is one of the 59 proposed closures. It operates from a leasehold property and offers a wide range of services, including access to pensions and benefits, tax payments, driving licence and passport renewals, lottery terminals and foreign exchange. The four counter positions and two self-service kiosks are often subject to long queues and high demand. For such a valuable service to continue to exist, we must look at ways for Crown post offices to diversify their services and grow their dwindling customer base. As I said in my speech on the Post Office's future way back in 2010:

“The message that the Government need to give to the Post Office is not ‘closure, closure, closure’ but ‘opportunity, opportunity, opportunity’.”—[*Official Report*, 2 November 2010; Vol. 517, c. 213WH.]

**Mr Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is aware, but there are rumours that a third round of franchise announcements and therefore closures of Crown post offices is due at any moment, with a potential loss of 190 jobs. Does he not think this debate might be an opportunity for the Minister to put some pressure on the Post Office to think again about that third round of potential franchises?

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown**: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing that to the attention of the House. I have not heard those rumours; I will simply respond with a line from later in my speech. If the Post Office were Tesco, it would be thinking not about

closing profitable branches but about how to make those branches more profitable by providing a more attractive service for the customer. That is what I would like my hon. Friend the Minister to take away from this debate today. Let us see how we can make the Post Office work better for its customers.

What the Post Office needs is a proper business model for the future, which, above all, needs to consider how much of the business should be commercially profitable and which bits of it the Government, through the taxpayer, are prepared to subsidise. Although I do not agree with the hon. Member for Luton North that it should be wholly brought back into public ownership, there is no doubt, given the number of small suburban and rural branches, that it will inevitably need some form of public subsidy in future. That public subsidy should be clearly defined. The bits that can be profitable, such as the Crown post offices, should be made to operate as efficiently as possible.

**Kelvin Hopkins**: An internal cross-subsidy is appropriate where there is a public service component. When we had the Royal Mail and post offices effectively in one industry, cross-subsidy was possible. I think we should return to that principle of cross-subsidy.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown**: The hon. Gentleman and I are largely in agreement. I have clearly said that there will continue to be a need for an element of taxpayer-funded subsidy for areas that can never be profitable, such as some of the smaller rural and suburban branches, so there will inevitably be a mixture of the commercial, which needs to be exploited to the maximum, and an element of public subsidy.

The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) mentioned the issue of banks closing. I have two important branches closing in small rural towns: Lloyds in Fairford and HSBC in Moreton-in-Marsh. Many of the services that those banks currently provide such as depositing cheques and drawing benefits, pensions and so on will be provided in future by the post office. If the post office then closes in those communities, my constituents in those communities will be left with a severe disadvantage.

**Albert Owen**: In addition to the banks closing and poor post office coverage, there is a lack of broadband and mobile coverage. So when people are asked to go online because they cannot physically get to these buildings, that is not available either.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown**: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I need to make progress now or I shall be reprimanded by the Chair for taking too long. There is so much to discuss in this debate and I have a little section in my speech about some of the innovative services that have been mentioned.

People view post office premises as dingy and out-of-date places that they do not want to visit. Clearly, the Post Office as a commercial organisation needs to do something about that. Branches need to be attractive places that the public want to visit. The franchise model is not the nirvana that everybody thinks it is. Pizza Express, for example—I say this to my hon. Friend the Minister—was at one point 100% franchised, but the offering was so variable that the franchises were brought back into central management and it is now a highly profitable

[*Geoffrey Clifton-Brown*]

enterprise. If the likes of Pizza Express take the view that they do not want franchisees and they want to manage it themselves, I am surprised that the Post Office is not going down that path.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I will give way one more time to the hon. Gentleman.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; I will try to be brief. In many parts of industry now, insourcing is the buzz word rather than outsourcing. There may be a strong case for that across public services as well as in the private sector.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I think it comes back to the Post Office maximising the opportunities that they have got. I want to come on to that a little later in my speech, but the hon. Gentleman is right. The Post Office needs to consider very carefully how it operates in today's world.

When the Post Office decoupled from the profitable Royal Mail business in 2012, little was done to create a coherent strategy for the future. Now, in 2016, with the change in retail banking behaviour and the closure of more than 1,700 branches across the UK in five years, small businesses need a post office bank even more. Currently, the Post Office provides access to business accounts for some of the bigger high street banks rather than its own service. However, this is limited, slower and inconsistent in terms of provisions across the network.

**Mr Winnick:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I have given way an awful lot. I might give way a little later in my speech, if I may say that gently to the hon. Gentleman.

For the estimated 1.5 million adults in the UK without a bank account, an affordable service, such as a post office bank account that offered responsible deals on personal loans, would help to tackle the problem of payday lenders that charge huge annualised sums. It would be of great benefit to some of the poorer people in our society. After all, if Tesco opened a wholly owned bank eight years ago, notwithstanding its recent hacking problems, why cannot the Post Office do the same? Tesco has innovatively expanded a range of financial services. As has been mentioned, across the channel, La Banque Postale has a mandate to increase access to financial services and offer microcredit loans to those who have previously been financially excluded.

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** Order. May I respectfully remind the hon. Gentleman that he has been on his feet for nine minutes, and quite a few other Members want to get into the debate. If he is nearing the end of his speech, I think that everyone will appreciate that.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I am grateful, Mr Wilson; I have taken rather too many interventions, so my speech has become rather too long.

The Post Office ought to look at innovative ways to improve its services. Its post offices are dull and dingy places, but perhaps it could spruce them up and think

about such improvements. There are all sorts of ways it could improve what it offers, such as internet hubs and internet cafés, business hubs and collection points for local authorities, and subletting if the premises are too large, as has been done in Penge.

I pay tribute to postmasters and postmistresses and their staff throughout the land, who do an incredible job. Often they go way beyond what their employers require, to help their communities. The post office is the glue that holds this country together. I appeal through the Minister for the Post Office to reconsider, among other things, its decision to close the Crown post office in Cirencester. It must be highly profitable, so why is it being closed? The Minister needs to look carefully at the closure process, to see whether it is the right thing for the country.

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** As quite a few hon. Members want to take part in the debate, I ask them to restrict their comments. I do not want to introduce a time limit, but it might come to that, so hon. Members need to be careful about interventions.

3.21 pm

**Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) on raising this matter.

I apologise for being slightly parochial, but in Northern Ireland there are some 500 post offices, and we are going through exactly the same problems. A recent report commissioned by the Government and carried out by YouGov and London Economics looked at the social value of the Post Office. From the survey, they found that 95% of individuals and nearly 90% of small and medium-sized enterprises used post offices at least once a year; but there is much more to it. The people who use them like using them. In the street as I was walking here, I met two people from the west country, and we discussed the fact that I would be speaking in the debate. They were senior citizens—elderly; they said they did not want to go digital. They like the community hub that works around the post office, and said please would I stand up for that.

I have twice spoken on this subject at Stormont. I was there only five years, and as a new boy it was almost the first thing I spoke about. There was a document about the six steps to save the post office; they included banking, broadband and working with everyone. It was a fantastic idea and everyone supported it, but it seemed to be ignored. At the end of my time there, it came up again. The point I was trying to make, which has already been made by others, was that as well as thinking of every post office as a centre of the community we should also look at the losses to villages, towns and parts of cities where the library, pub and bank have gone and the school has closed; we should start to work with councils, parish councils and whatever community bodies are there, to identify the places that we must save, which are the community hub and the post office. Rather than let decisions about those things be made without talking to others, let us work through them and try to hold everything together. If subsidies are needed—I think that was an excellent idea—let us try to get that to happen.

We can all learn from each other, including Members from Northern Ireland and Scotland—all the devolved Governments. Let us try to find policies that will pull

things together, so that the Post Office must talk to us before it starts closures and we can work out how to save a town's post office. My post office in Antrim has been having a battle to find a place to go. The chemist and the local retail shop turned it down. By the time a decision was made, everyone thought the post office was closing, and the figures had gone down; so those concerned did not want it, because it was not going to bring anything. We need to talk before the news gets out and causes such a reaction.

**Albert Owen:** That is absolutely right. Llangefni in my constituency put a petition before Parliament. We won the argument; those concerned agreed with us then. However, the Post Office has come back with the same proposal to close the same Crown post offices. It is not listening.

**Danny Kinahan:** That is exactly the point; the Post Office is not listening, but it needs to. At least it has put a consultation out, in our case; but it should listen before decisions are made. I make my plea—let us all talk to each other, consider towns and the centres of communities, and work together.

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** If hon. Members keep their remarks as brief as that, we may get everyone in.

3.25 pm

**Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con):** It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Members who have spoken already.

I want to support the millions of customers all over the land who rely on the Post Office service in many remote areas as well as in towns. A post office recently closed in my village, East Coker, so I understand how important that is to a community; but it is true even in big towns such as Crewkerne, where the town centre post office recently closed.

3.26 pm

*Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.*

3.41 pm

*On resuming—*

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** Because we donated 15 minutes to the Division, we will now finish at 4.45 pm. I want to bring in the Front Benchers at quarter past 4. I reiterate that if people limit the time that they take, everyone should get in. I call Marcus Fysh to continue his speech.

**Marcus Fysh:** Thank you, Mr Wilson. I was saying that it is often only when a community faces the loss of its post office that it realises what a wonderful service the post office system provides. I speak in support of not just the customers but the postmasters who provide that service.

Post offices are often owned by hard-working families who constantly look for ways to improve their flagging profitability and get more footfall. Postmasters run 97% of the country's 11,500 post office branches, but they lack any meaningful union membership or collective voice. They are represented only by the National Federation of SubPostmasters, a trade association that is funded in part by Post Office Ltd. NFSP chief executive George Thomson recently said that "without serious changes" to the Post Office Ltd business, "there may not be a network to fight for in the future."

Successive Governments have spent billions subsidising Post Office Ltd. Some £2 billion of taxpayers' money has been used on the latest network transformation programme, which has not yet proved able to make the network sustainable and profitable. The Post Office has halved its losses in the last financial year, but that seems to have been done at the expense of postmasters' pay and increasing branch closures and redundancies. The front-line service has suffered: the queues remain and extended opening hours are sometimes inconsistent and quite unpredictable. We must ask why. In many cases, postmasters are struggling to staff and operate their branches on the money that the Post Office now pays. The reduced revenues from core services simply make many things that post offices do unprofitable, and I know from speaking to postmasters up and down my constituency that they are genuinely concerned about whether they will be able to keep going with those things.

Hon. Members have made several useful proposals during the debate, and I urge the Government to consider them carefully, because Post Office Ltd itself does not seem to have any obvious plans to introduce new services or increase revenue in a way that could help. A growing number of post office branches are up for sale—there are currently more than 730 advertised on the Daltons Business website alone.

One of the key issues with the franchise model that we need to look at is that the computer system on which the whole network relies is well and truly overdue for replacement. It is, in fact, at the centre of an ongoing High Court action. Thousands of postmasters have been blamed for losses that may in fact have been caused by the use of that computer system. Some of those postmasters have been convicted and some have been made bankrupt by the Post Office, and losing that court action may pose a major solvency problem for the Post Office itself. I call on the Government to look into that with some urgency.

In that context, it should not be a major surprise that the unions are taking action, although the Post Office's move away from a defined-benefit pension scheme is possibly not the right point to complain about, given that there has been a major move away from such schemes in almost every other walk of life in recent years. We need to look at the Post Office; it is in danger of running out of control and its governance issues require serious work and attention. I urge the Government to take an active role in that, because postmasters and their customers up and down the land really depend on the Post Office.

3.45 pm

**Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) on securing this important debate.

There are two affected Crown post offices in my constituency. Local people have pointed out to me that that is particularly bad news for disabled people and there will be a reduction in post office services in the area. Tens of thousands of pounds have recently been spent on refurbishing the Crouch End post office. There seems to be a distinct lack of logic in ploughing a whole



[Catherine West]

lot of public money into doing up a post office and promptly closing it. In the case of the closure of Muswell Hill Crown post office, there is a further risk to local jobs, because there are another 60 jobs at the Royal Mail sorting office behind the post office. In the London property market, once the doors of a facility like that close, a real estate agent will pop up and sell it either for some sort of housing development or more coffee shops. If there is one thing that Crouch End does not need, it is more coffee shops. We need proper services for local people.

In the various parts of my constituency that have become more populous in a short time, with denser housing developments, we desperately need services such as post offices. A petition has been signed by hundreds of thousands of local people. Will the Minister say whether that petition has been taken into account? I have not met anyone locally who wants to see the doors of the Crown post offices close.

On parliamentary scrutiny, I have been asking for months for some sort of debate. I am pleased that my hon. Friend succeeded in securing this debate, but there has been a lack of debate. I requested a meeting with the Minister, but I was not successful. I also requested a meeting with her predecessor, who sits in the House of Lords, and was again unsuccessful. Will the Minister pledge today to meet those of us who are affected so we can each have a few more minutes to go into detail about this urgent issue?

**Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): I refer Members to the fact that I received tremendous support from the Communication Workers Union during my 2015 general election campaign. Does my hon. Friend agree that as we approach Christmas, the importance of the post offices at the centre of communities is heightened? Although I understand that her constituency is densely populated, that is particularly important in constituencies with rural areas.

**Catherine West:** My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Regardless of whether they are in rural areas or urban areas, post offices are places where people can meet friendly faces, so they do not necessarily have to do everything over the internet. We all treasure that kind of community service.

Will the Minister also tell us whether the Government's consultation is genuine? Time and again, we have had an announcement by the Post Office, a rather anodyne meeting and then a sense of resignation—a sense that “We're just going to close them anyway.” If the consultation were real, we would have a genuine dialogue and a genuine sense that what we as Members of Parliament said was actually going to make a difference. Sadly, there is a fog of resignation over this issue. I fear that that is why many people tell us that they feel disconnected from national politics. They spend hours lining up to see us at surgeries to tell us something and then we do not get a result. It is not through lack of trying. Thousands of petitioners stand outside in the snow, hail and rain, collecting signatures that their MP cannot even get a response to. I am sounding a bit frustrated because that is how we feel—those of us stood outside the post office, Saturday after Saturday, getting signatures for

petitions but not getting a response. I want an assurance from the Minister that the voices of Members of Parliament will be heard and that the consultation is not just a sham.

I always want to be a positive Member of Parliament, so I want to give the Minister some ideas. Suggestions were put forward in “Securing the Post Office Network in the Digital Age” in November 2010 to make it the front office for Government and to grow financial services. We know there is a crisis in the general high street banks. After all the banking scandals, people cannot trust whether the bank is on their side, but people do trust the Post Office as an emblem, a community symbol and a friend.

I hope the Government will look again and genuinely consider what we have to say. We are here not because we want to spend more time with each other, but because people want our voices to be heard. Will the Minister give us a reassurance—as a new Minister, there is a new opportunity—that she will listen to us genuinely and give us a positive hearing? People want their Crown post offices, so listen to our voices and think again rather than implementing these foolish and unpopular proposals.

3.51 pm

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), with whom, unusually, I found myself agreeing quite a lot. It is a pleasure to be here in the interests of the community I have the privilege to represent. Just over a month ago, the Post Office told me it was opening a short consultation on the proposed closure of a Crown post office in Tonbridge. That is a post office that many people rely on. I wrote to the Post Office on 14 October asking for details and the reasons for the closure. I wanted to know exactly which services it was to discontinue and which it was to carry on providing in a nearby stationer's. After a month, they had not responded, and when I finally did get a response it did not answer the questions I had asked.

That was particularly disappointing because the Tonbridge Crown post office, like many around the country, as we have heard—indeed, as far afield as Northern Ireland and the Cotswolds—is essential to the community, just as post offices are across our land. They are, of course, the very beginning of our true national identity, when the Post Office really did tie the nation together, with the penny post, linking it through the train network and creating one truly United Kingdom.

For too many, that idea has gone. That is wrong, because the post office sits as an important part of our newly refurbished high street in Tonbridge. It is not just important for the elderly; it is particularly important for those with accessibility needs. My community is privileged to have a post office that is near to disabled parking bays and which has good accessibility, appropriate seating and wide enough aisles. It is therefore suitable for people with accessibility issues. In the proposal, such services would not be offered and the narrower corridors and seating would cause problems.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** I strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman. The survey I mentioned in my speech about WHSmith franchises said that they do not provide for people with disabilities in the same way as Crown post offices.

**Tom Tugendhat:** The hon. Gentleman is right, and that is what we may see in Tonbridge if the decision is not reversed. I will ask the Minister to raise her voice in support of the petition.

I would like to quote Gordon Lawrence, a resident of Tonbridge who wrote to me last night. He said:

“As you have rightly said, the town is undergoing a transformation, certainly since I arrived here in 1984, almost unrecognisable in the way the character has changed. The building programmes that have been initiated over recent years, with those still to come, have increased and continue to increase the local population”.

In the context of a growing town with an increasing population, it baffles me that the Post Office feels that a site that it only recently spent an awful lot of money redeveloping to make more accessible and approachable should now close when it is clearly being heavily used. Indeed, when I go to the post office, as we and many of our constituents do, to send large numbers of letters, I notice clearly how many people are using it at many times of the day.

Having failed to get satisfactory assurances from the Post Office to address the concerns I first raised at the start of the consultation, it has become clear that this move is not in the best interests of the people. That is why I launched a petition just over a week ago calling for the Post Office to change its decision, and already 1,500 people have signed it. From Tonbridge, a town of 30,000-odd people, 1,500 is a significant number—it is 5%. As we all know from petitions in our communities, that is a hell of a return. Indeed, 99% of the people I spoke to indicated that they were unhappy with the closure.

The proposed location is another WHSmith, as the hon. Member for Luton North identified, with narrow corridors and without seating or accessibility. The point the Post Office seems to make is that that will lead to longer opening hours. Well, opening hours are not everything, especially for those who cannot get inside or get the services they want. Opening hours are certainly not everything if the services needed, whether biometrics or parcel post, are not available.

Sadly, I have seen that not only in Tonbridge—I know many people are talking about the same in other communities—but in another area I have the privilege to represent: the village of Hadlow. The community has benefited from a local post office, but again that is being squeezed. The term “local” has a specific meaning in the Post Office business model that I would like to explore a little more. According to the Post Office, a local post office is one with extended opening hours. That sounds good, but the House of Commons Library tells us that a local post office does not have all the services of a traditional Crown post office. That is why I am campaigning in my community, as I know many others are in theirs, to have stand-alone Crown post offices defended, because for so many of us they offer that essential link not only to keep the nation together, but to keep people in touch with their families and enable all the wonderful trade that we have seen grow—in internet packages and all the rest of it—to develop even further.

In villages from Cowden to Mereworth, which have lost post offices over the last century, it is essential that we reinforce the need for the stand-alone Crown post office. I will lodge a petition on that with the House this evening, and I would welcome the Minister’s support in changing the Post Office’s decision.

3.57 pm

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) for bringing the debate forward. I really wanted to speak in the debate because I recall the round of post office closures in 2008 and 2009. I remember going door to door with others gathering hundreds and thousands of signatures on a petition to save local Crown post offices in towns around what came to be my constituency. That was done in response to the anger and despair so many felt about the closure of the local Crown post offices. I remember speaking at public meetings when I encountered at first hand the sense of resignation felt by too many people that what they wanted and their community felt it needed was simply not valued—it did not matter to the powers that be. In the event, five vital and much-beloved post offices were closed.

We often hear politicians talking about community—how it is important, how it matters and how it should be valued. It should also matter when a community comes together to express its concern about a valued asset, the local Crown post office, which in so many ways is the beating heart of a community, if not one of its ventricles. Post offices provide a lifeline: they are the lifeblood, even, of our communities. That is even more true of our rural communities. For such communities, post offices boost their diversity and resilience as well as protecting jobs and customer service.

The decline of the Crown post office is a matter of great sadness. Over the years, this trusted institution on our high street—perhaps it is the most trusted institution on our high street—has been stripped of too many of its functions. That is despite its highly trained staff and its perfect position to provide banking and other services. However, instead of modernisation, increasingly we see decimation.

More and more services are being outsourced to retailers such as WHSmith, with that chain installing its wee counters at the back of its stores, meaning poorer service as well as the loss of a beloved community asset. WHSmith and other outlets do not want to match the terms and conditions that the Post Office offers its employees. Even if it did, the income that the post office counters offer those retailers would not cover that cost, so there is now the absurd situation of the Post Office using tens of millions of pounds to pay off long-serving staff, so they can be replaced by part-time workers on the minimum wage, which has led to uncertainty and understandable industrial unrest across the whole network.

The Scottish National party firmly opposed the privatisation of Royal Mail. However, at the time it was privatised the UK Government said that the Post Office would be kept wholly in the public sector. Instead, a new 10-year deal with WHSmith to relocate yet more post office branches into those stores was announced. Will the Minister tell us where this is leading? Will she give us assurances that the promise to keep post offices in public ownership will be honoured?

Franchising is quite rightly viewed as soft privatisation, and the Minister needs to address that point to reassure Members. We need to know that our post offices have a future, and that that future is in the public sector, as promised. We need a plan for our post offices, and we could do worse than explore the measures France undertook for its post offices when it established La Banque Postale—

[Patricia Gibson]

excuse my pronunciation. Alongside those problems, we have seen high street banks gradually withdrawing and retreating from our high streets, so that must be a reasonable option.

Like in France, our post offices could make a plan to grow revenues in areas such as financial services, with which France has had huge success. Our post offices need not be in managed decline, and I am very interested to hear the Minister's response and how she views the future of what remains of our post offices, which are community assets held in deep affection, and how they can be secured.

4.1 pm

**Mr Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): There are five questions that the Minister should answer. Before raising them, I join other Members in praising my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), and I echo his declaration of interest.

First, it would be helpful to hear from the Minister why she thinks Post Office income from financial services have grown so slowly? It was heralded as part of the great future for the Post Office by Vince Cable when he launched a document on its future back in November 2010. Secondly, why has Government business going through the Post Office been allowed to plummet? Ministers promised the reverse, again back in 2010.

It is not only the French who seem to be able to run postal services better than the current Government. The Italians have also made a huge success of getting a post office bank up and running. Similarly, New Zealand has a highly successful post office bank, which was established in the past 15 years. There are successful models involving financial services. What is striking about the debate is the cross-party concern about the crisis in the Post Office at the moment.

Thirdly—I ask this as a Co-operative Member as well as a Labour Member—whatever happened to the idea of the Post Office becoming a mutual, with a more involved workforce and local community involvement to help to plot a more co-operative future for the Post Office? The last ministerial mention of that vision from November 2010 that I can find was in November 2013. It would be helpful to know whether the Minister still adheres to that possibility. Fourthly, is the Post Office's 2018-19 funding package, which I understand is being negotiated in Whitehall at the moment, going to lead to more closures and to more full-time employees being pushed out of the door, or is it going to be a genuine opportunity for serious investment in new services?

Fifthly, and lastly, as I understand it, the 10-year contract that the Post Office has with Royal Mail can be reviewed from January next year. It would be good to hear reassurance from the Minister that Royal Mail intends to stick absolutely to the terms of its contract with the Post Office going forward.

Post Office revenues from Government services have fallen by almost 40% since 2010, as no new Government services are using the Post Office. Of those that still are, many Departments are promoting online alternatives. Again, it would be useful to hear from the Minister what discussions she has had with other Government Departments to encourage them to use the Post Office.

I ask that question because the Post Office being the front office for the Government was the first part of the great vision that Vince Cable set out in November 2010. If revenues from Government services have declined by 40%, it raises some fairly alarming questions. There are rumours that Government insiders themselves accept that that option for the Post Office's future has largely been a failure.

The second objective that Vince Cable set out was the expansion of financial services. The Post Office's revenue from financial services has grown by just 2% over the past six years. Why does it still not offer a business account? In one of the district centres in north Harrow in my constituency, there is no bank, and there has not been for some time. The Post Office is the only financial services player still in existence there. The option of a business account would be hugely beneficial to small businesses in that one district alone.

I am told that the Post Office is trialling a current account. Indeed, we are apparently four and a half years into the trial; it was supposed to launch in 2014. Why has it taken so long before that product could possibly be launched? There is no dedicated children's product either. I am aware of the junior individual savings account, but £500 has to be put into that account up front to get it up and running, and that money cannot be accessed until the child turns 18. Given that many people stick with the financial services provider that they start with, it would surely make good economic sense for the Minister to insist that the Post Office quickly gets its act together on a dedicated children's product.

All of those problems suggest a business that is not taking seriously the ambition of substantial revenue growth from financial services, as Vince Cable once promised. The hon. Member for Yeovil (Marcus Fysh) rightly praised the contribution of postmasters and postmistresses—particularly those who are members of the Federation of Small Businesses. The FSB published a report in October called "Locked Out", which said:

"Business banking services provided at some Post Office branches and franchises are too limited. Some services, such as cash and cheque clearing facilities, also appear to be processed more slowly than in bank branches. Other services, such as inter-account transfers and currency exchange, are not available. As the future of the network moves away from full-service post offices to franchises there is concern about the impact on small business access."

It is not just the Communication Workers Union and staff that want change in terms of financial services, it is small business that have genuine concerns. I hope that the Minister will act.

4.8 pm

**Mr Mark Williams** (Ceredigion) (LD): I will be very quick. In many ways, I will reiterate many of the messages that we have heard in the Chamber this afternoon. I will reflect specifically on the position of the Crown post office in Aberystwyth in my constituency.

Many Members have talked about the inadequacy of the consultation process and the complete inability of the Post Office to listen to the many representations that have been made. That is certainly the case with the campaigning that we undertook in my constituency. We were not surprised that WHSmith emerged as the franchisee in Aberystwyth. Of the 28 branches where franchise



partners have been announced this year, 27 have been with WHSmith. I have to say that, since the announcement of a consultation in March, nothing more than lip service has been paid to that word.

**Neil Coyle:** It is very difficult for Post Office representatives to listen to local communities when they do not even attend a meeting. The Walworth Society in my constituency set up a public meeting with councillors and myself, and the Post Office did not even turn up.

**Mr Williams:** I have had exactly the same experience in my constituency. We had two public meetings. The Post Office came to the second one, but not the first. We had petitions and demonstrations. We made representations to everybody, with four political parties working together on the streets of Aberystwyth. It was a very good experience, but it has had absolutely no effect on WHSmith whatsoever. Individual managers have been courteous and polite, and have occasionally answered the phone and come to see me but, on the substance of the case, we have been well and truly ignored.

The Post Office still has not addressed the fundamental concerns we have raised. The research undertaken on the record of WHSmith by Consumer Focus—a very good organisation that existed at the time—concluded that queue times, services times and customer advice are all worse under WHSmith than they were under the Crown post office regime. There are also genuine concerns about disabled access, the number of counter positions open and congestion in the shop. Of course, there is also the impact of losing good, hard-working staff who have years of experience.

The CWU has said—this is worth noting, and I hope the Minister will convey the concerns about the consultation process to the Post Office—that it is unaware of a single case where public consultation has overturned the Post Office's proposals in recent years. My constituents in Aberystwyth are convinced, like I am, that the whole process is an utter sham.

I want to talk a little about the staff and how they have been treated. They were given three options, which seems clinical and very kind to be given three options. They were given the opportunity to take redundancy. In peripheral parts of Wales, if we go as far as we can to the west, the opportunities for good, well-paid jobs are few and far between. Secondly, staff were given the opportunity to redeploy—this is the option that really got to the emotions of many staff—to the nearest Crown post office. If we picture Aberystwyth on the weather map on the news, it is in the middle of the west coast of Wales. The nearest Crown post offices that my constituents could relocate to were in Port Talbot or in Shrewsbury across the border in England. That is not an option for my constituents at all. The third option was for my constituents to go down the route of TUPE agreements, which we have heard many concerns about. I am genuinely concerned. We might seem to have lost the battle, but like the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), I appeal to the Minister at this late stage to get involved in this case and to do what she can to influence things.

I am conscious that my friend, the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), wants to speak, so I will finish by saying this. We have lost post office after post office in rural communities. We can

wax lyrical about the emotions of it and the effect on rural communities, but they are very real. We are talking about some of the most scattered, remote rural communities. When the pub, the church and the school have been taken out, the final blow is when that community loses its post office, which has a galvanising role. That has been the record of successive Governments, including coalition ones in which Liberals were involved, the current Government and preceding ones. We have to reverse that trend. We have to look at a sensible level of subsidy to sustain the network in rural areas, because once it is gone, it will not come back.

4.13 pm

**Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I too will be brief, because I am conscious of time. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) on securing this important debate.

Post offices provide an essential service to communities right across the UK. It is important that, through any potential future changes, that service remains rooted in our communities and that we keep the public at the heart of the services provided. The Post Office has been described as a national institution that is at the heart of society. Many post offices, like the ones in my constituency, are more than just a post office; they are a hub for the community. Most are also shops or a place to buy confectionery or stationery. In my constituency, there are many isolated communities, and many people who go to the post office to post letters or collect pensions also benefit from the social interaction there.

We know that lifestyles have changed. I am sure we all understand that, although in the past post offices were used for a multitude of services, many of those services are now available elsewhere or indeed online, so it has become increasingly difficult for post offices to remain viable without diversifying. However, changes to the delivery of post office services need to be carried out in consultation with and with the support of local residents, who are, after all, the customer.

I have particular concerns about the process of making major changes to the delivery of post office services. Following an extensive consultation process, the Post Office recently announced that it is proceeding with the relocation of a post office at Elliots Town in my constituency under the modernisation and transformation programme. Those proposals are bitterly opposed by the local community. In this case, the consultation process involved two public meetings attended by more than 100 local residents on each occasion; representations from local councillors, myself and the Assembly Member; and a petition signed by more than 1,000 local people, who raised common issues of concern about the suitability of the proposed new location in terms of access, privacy, parking and so on.

In addition, proposals were put forward without the support of the current post office operators, who wish to maintain the current location and are likely to lose their jobs as a result of the post office being franchised. I am deeply concerned that many of my constituents in that area feel that the Post Office has not listened to their concerns. Many feel that the current popular post office meets their needs and they do not understand the

[Gerald Jones]

need for change at this time. A large number of local residents have threatened not to use the post office in future if proposals are implemented.

For post offices to remain a viable part of community life, the Post Office needs to be responsive to and understanding of the concerns of its customers. Will the Minister comment on the general principle of the Post Office's response to public consultation? Does she agree that the Post Office must ensure that consultation is meaningful and that any decisions it takes about the future of post offices should be in line with what its customers want and expect?

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** Before I call the Front Benchers, I remind Members that I would like to leave a couple of minutes for the mover of the motion to sum up at the end.

4.16 pm

**Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I commend the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) for bringing this debate to the forefront today.

As we have heard, post offices clearly provide a lifeblood for so many communities. Sometimes, that is easy to forget in the age of texting and emails, but the fact remains. Paisley has a population of 76,000 people. It is the fifth largest place in Scotland. I know that some Members have spoken about post offices far out in rural areas, but I want to talk a wee bit about urban post offices like one in my constituency. The post office is located in the Piazza, which is one of Scotland's most successful shopping centres in terms of occupancy levels. Most, if not all, of its units are in use. It has its own security guard service. People feel safe and appreciate the fact that vulnerable customers feel at ease when they go to collect important documents, their money, pension or whatever else. The location is absolutely perfect. It is located straight on the high street, which is right beside the bus stops. The doors and lifts from the car park are literally right beside the post office.

Andy Furey from the CWU, who is here today, told me that Paisley was the golden standard of post offices. It provided a specialist service. It had staff with 20 or 30 years' experience behind them. It was accessible, and it was spacious. That post office has shut today. As we debate this right now, that post office has closed its doors. That will have devastating consequences for Paisley as a town.

Currently, we are endeavouring and bidding to become the city of culture for 2021, and we are trying to shine a light on the culture and level of community that we have in Paisley. Despite all we have to offer, most would agree that Paisley is not without its problems. We are desperately trying to get the high street reinvigorated and re-energised and to boost the local economy a wee bit, yet at no point was there any consideration or assessment of what damage this closure would have on the high street or the Piazza. My office and I organised a public meeting in Paisley to discuss this. The owners of other units in the Piazza said that they benefited most from the post office because it brought in a large footfall of people who then visit their shops.

**Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP):** In East Kilbride, we are also fighting to save the Crown post office in our town centre, which is crucial to the local community. If it is sold off, it will not have the specialist staff, the same service or the inclusivity for the most vulnerable. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Post Office must be accountable and that we must retain these valuable assets for our communities?

**Mhairi Black:** I could not agree more. An hon. Member who is no longer in her place—I cannot remember her constituency—highlighted the issue perfectly when she said that in reality we are going to lose people with special skills acquired over 20 or 30 years, who will be replaced by WHSmith staff on the minimum wage who have not had adequate training necessarily.

At the public meeting that I mentioned, the Post Office admitted that it had not considered the economic impact of the post office's closure. Most concerning are the wider impacts for my constituents. As Members may be aware, quite a few refugees and asylum seekers have been located to Paisley. The post office in the Piazza was the only place where they could realistically have access to the Home Office's digital application services. Now that it is losing that service, those people will be expected to travel to West Nile Street, nine miles away in Glasgow, with no money or means of travel.

The worst thing about the closure is how little sense it makes. The plan was to move this first-class post office into the wholly inadequate WHSmith—right to the back. There is no clear route from the shop's front door to the back, which immediately restricts people with mobility problems. It is now situated on a hill, which may not seem like a big deal, but for someone aged 80 it is a considerable challenge. It is located in a pedestrian zone, so you cannot even drop someone off at the door.

At the public meeting, I blessed the folk from the Post Office who had to come along to argue for the change because they were eaten alive. Their figures were wrong and they could not tell us basic facts for ridiculous reasons. They could not tell us whether the post office was making a profit or a loss, or how big the loss was. They could not tell us what the footfall was. It was embarrassing, if I am honest.

We were told that there would be a consultation. Consultations can be a good thing—I am doing one now for my private Member's Bill—but to be good they have to be genuine. This one seemed to be total lip service. At the end of it, despite the fact that I have genuinely yet to meet anyone in favour of the proposed change, as with so many others we have heard about, the Post Office said that the change would happen anyway.

I know that many healthy suggestions were made—I know because I made many of them—such as that the post office currently has three units in the Piazza, so why not close one or two if they were costing money. The CWU rightly pointed out that, if the Post Office is seeking a franchise partner, the most obvious candidate is surely Royal Mail. It was almost as though it did not matter a jot what suggestions were made because the move was happening. Lo and behold, I then discovered that WHSmith was advertising jobs for the new post office two weeks before the consultation finished. The whole thing was a sham.

I tried repeatedly to have a meeting with the Post Office's chief exec, but that was refused point blank. My request went backwards and forwards. Eventually, I said, "I will go anywhere at any time for a five-minute meeting. Just tell me when." There was no reply. The lack of accountability during the process was incredible. The whole thing was a done deal from the start.

In the Chamber a couple of months ago, I asked the Minister how much money had been spent on refurbishing the post office in Paisley since 2010. He said that nearly £500,000 of public funds had been spent doing it up, only for it to be sold off to WHSmith. The reality is that this is privatisation through the back door.

What does WHSmith know about postal services? It is falling behind in terms of quality of service and the different things it sells in its shops. If it is already struggling, what is its motivation for taking on a post office that is apparently haemorrhaging money left, right and centre? Why would it want that post office if it is losing so much money? If the sale of Royal Mail did not result in the expected profit, how will the franchising of post offices be any different?

In June 2015, the Government sold the remaining 30% stake in Royal Mail. The fact is that taxpayers have been short-changed yet again. The Government sold the shares for far less than they were worth. The whole thing stinks and it is off the backs of my constituents and those of every Member here. We must not tolerate it. It is clear that the whole separation has been a massive mistake. The Government must bring both Royal Mail and the Post Office back into the public sector.

4.24 pm

**Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Wilson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) on securing this debate and all my hon. Friends who have spoken. I pay tribute to the many postal workers and the CWU who have brought many of the issues to our attention. As constituency MPs, we are all keen to ensure that the Post Office has a long-term future for the benefit of the communities we represent, and we want to know what the Government's plans are for making the vision of a 21st century Post Office a reality.

It has practically become a cliché to say that post offices are at the heart of our communities, but it is a cliché because it is true. From city high streets and suburbs to villages up and down the country, the local post office is a landmark and an essential part of life. It is not just a place to buy stamps and send parcels; it provides a host of services. My hon. Friends the Members for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) and for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) pointed out that, in rural areas, they can often be the only place where some services are available. It is no exaggeration to say that they are a lifeline.

I recognise that we are living in an ever-changing, increasingly digital world in which access to services online is undermining some of the Post Office's traditional role. That is simply a fact of the times we live in. What concerns me is that the Government have apparently accepted the challenge as insurmountable and have embarked on a programme of managed decline, instead of looking at how we can make one of our proud national institutions fit for the 21st century.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) made a good point when she said that last year 50 Crown post offices—the larger branches, usually in prominent high street locations—were franchised and moved into the back of many WHSmith shops. There are plans to do the same with 59 more this year. That may seem like a pragmatic way of keeping post offices going through trying times, but the impact of that franchising on the quality of service provided and on the terms of employment offered makes me question the underlying rationale.

When Consumer Focus, as it then was, looked at the quality of service being provided by franchised branches in WHSmith a few years ago, it found that they consistently ranked below normal post office branches for queue times, the time taken for transactions at the counter, the number of counter positions staffed, customer services and advice on products. There were also big issues with disabled access, as many have said.

The Post Office's own monitoring suggests there is no drop in the quality of services following franchising. However, as we have never seen its monitoring figures, I take that with a pinch of salt. The consumer organisation Which? is doing its own research on the matter, which it is hoping to publish in the next few weeks and which will no doubt make interesting reading for all of us.

When looking at what happens to jobs when branches are franchised, it is not hard to see why the quality of service drops.

**Neil Coyle:** Is there a question here not just about poorer service, but about taxpayer-funded poorer service? The lower pay usually offered by companies such as WHSmith is subsidised by taxpayers in tax credits and housing benefit. There have also been upfront subsidies, such as the £500,000 spent in Paisley and more than £100,000 being spent on Walworth Road. Other Members have referred to taxpayers' money being used to tart up formerly dingy post offices before they were franchised.

**Gill Furniss:** My hon. Friend makes a very good point. This is not what taxpayers were expecting. We were looking at something for the future—a lot of taxpayers' money to make this the gateway to a fully functioning Post Office service. We have heard representations in the Chamber today that that has not been the case.

Jobs with good terms and conditions are being replaced all too often with part-time, minimum wage roles. There is little to attract long-serving, experienced staff to transfer to a franchised branch. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton North made the good point that last year just 10 staff out of 400 in Crown offices being franchised chose TUPE; the rest took compromise agreements to leave. Those agreements cost the Post Office £13 million. So much for the Government working for everyone. What a waste of public money. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) also mentioned that experienced staff are leaving in droves. That means that the quality that the Post Office stands for is undermined and a community asset is hollowed out—and make no mistake: these are community assets.

Franchising is done in the face of public opposition. Consultations on individual branches are exercises in public relations rather than proper public engagement. The branches targeted for franchising tend to be in



[Gill Furniss]

more urban areas, disproportionately affecting the services available to already disadvantaged groups and harming the general health of our high streets.

The Post Office is clearly facing a crisis. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) has an excellent article in the *Daily Mirror* laying all that out today. Since the Post Office was split from Royal Mail, it has struggled to keep its head above water. Traditional revenue streams are shrinking; plans to make it a “Front Office” for Government have disappeared into the ether; and an expansion of financial services has slipped off the agenda. One thousand jobs were lost last year, and another 2,000 are under threat this year.

The Government must take action now to halt the decline, and work with all those concerned to come up with a plan for a better future than the one currently on offer. Although I welcome the consultation document that has been published, I am concerned that it does not go far enough, and I urge the Minister to be bold in formulating a strategy for the future.

Will the Minister revisit the plans to make post offices the front office for Government that has been promised for so long? Post office revenues from Government services have fallen by 40% since 2010. Will she commit to expanding the financial services on offer? After all, the Post Office current account is not matched by either the children’s or business accounts. Surely that is an obvious starting point for expanding services. With the retreat of banks from the high street, the demand for a postal bank has never been greater. Will she explore how our post offices really can be the front office of Government and provide all the services that people require?

I ask the Minister with all sincerity whether she will call for a moratorium on any further franchising of Post Office branches until there has been proper engagement on what the future of the service will look like. This proud institution, its employees and the communities that it serves deserve better than a slow slide into oblivion.

4.32 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) on securing today’s very important debate on the future of the Post Office.

The Government recognise the crucial role that post offices play in communities across the country. I echo the numerous tributes that we heard in the debate to the sub-post offices and management and staff who work in the post office network, including our own excellent post offices here in the Palace of Westminster. They do a wonderful job.

Between 2010 and 2018, the Government will have provided nearly £2 billion to maintain, modernise and protect a network of at least 11,500 branches across the country. The Government set the direction for the Post Office. That means that we ask it to maintain a national network of post offices that is accessible to all, and to do so more sustainably, with less need for taxpayer subsidy over time. That includes the maintenance—this was a manifesto commitment of my party at the last

election—of 3,000 rural and semi-rural branches, about which we have heard little this afternoon and which would otherwise be uneconomic to run. Post Office Ltd delivers that strategy as an independent business; we do not interfere in its day-to-day operations or decisions about the provision and location of branches.

Today, as I said, there are more than 11,600 branches in the UK and the network is at its most stable for decades—although people would not know that from the debate. That is because the Post Office is transforming and modernising its network, thanks to the investment that the Government have been willing to make. The Government support has enabled almost 7,000 branches across the UK—more than half the entire network—to be modernised, offering a better experience for customers and more sustainable retail propositions for postmasters.

**Catherine West:** Can the Minister explain the logic whereby a lot of public funds are put into a branch of the Crown Post Office and then it is promptly closed?

**Margot James:** The hon. Lady mentioned the Crouch End post office in her speech, and I made a mental note to look into that. I cannot comment on that particular branch. Occasionally in business, someone makes an investment, it does not work out and they have to cut their losses. That happens in any business. I cannot comment on the specific branch, but I will look into the matter.

**Neil Coyle:** Will the Minister give way?

**Margot James:** No, not for a few minutes. I have very little time and I am going to make some progress.

Customers benefit from an extra 200,000 opening hours every week and the largest Sunday retail network in the country. Indeed, the network in the constituency of the hon. Member for Luton North is in fine shape as a result of the modernisation programme. Across the 10 branches in his constituency, customers now have an additional 297 hours a week when post offices are open, with more than half his local branches open on Sundays.

The subsidy needed to sustain the network has dropped from a peak of £210 million in 2012 to just £80 million this year, and should continue to fall. The business continues to reduce its losses: it has gone from a loss of £120 million in 2012-13 to £24 million in 2015-16.

I would like to reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Marcus Fysh), who is not in his place now, that the number of branches is almost unchanged since 2011. In that year, there were 11,820; there are now 11,643. That is a very small difference. In fact, I would like to make the point, because I have been quite outraged by some of the comments made in the debate, that during the last Labour Government, virtually half the entire post office operation in this country was closed. Conservative Members were always outside with petitions in those days, and this Government and the coalition Government before them have stabilised the network with minimal losses. I congratulate the board, management and staff of Post Office Ltd on all they have achieved.

All that has led, of course, to customer satisfaction remaining high, at 95%. Also, the Association of Convenience Stores produced its local shop report, completely independently of the Post Office, a couple of

months ago, and the post office was rated the No. 1 service on the high street. It was voted the most desired amenity by the public. People would not think that—  
[*Interruption.*]

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** Order.

**Margot James:** People would not think that from the tone and tenor of the debate this afternoon. [*Interruption.*]

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** Order.

**Margot James:** I will now answer a few of the points that were made. My hon. Friends the Members for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) and for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) understandably paid tribute to their Crown post offices, in Cirencester and Tonbridge respectively. I am very sorry that I am unable to join them in their campaign against franchising of their local Crown post offices, because both are currently running at a loss. For every pound that is spent in the post office in Cirencester in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds, £1.30 has to be spent on running it. We have to be mindful of that. I say to the hon. Member for—I apologise for forgetting her constituency. [HON. MEMBERS: “Paisley.”] I say to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) that the Crown post office there was losing almost £2 for every pound that was spent. That is really why that unfortunate decision had to be made. I was sorry to hear what she had to say about the effect on some of her constituents.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Will the Minister give way?

**Margot James:** I am sorry, but I have to stop shortly to leave time for the hon. Member for Luton North.

As I said earlier, we cannot keep these Crown post offices open and losing money and stick to our commitment to keep post offices open in the rural and semi-rural areas, where often it is the only service left. Really, with some of these Crowns that are closing, walking a short distance away, sometimes to a more convenient location, to a WHSmith, is a small price for customers to pay to keep this network operating across the country, which has not proven to be economic.

**Mhairi Black:** Will the Minister give way?

**Margot James:** I am really sorry not to be able to give way again, but I have got to stop in two or three minutes' time. I want to answer a couple of points made by the hon. Members for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) and for Harrow West (Mr Thomas).

Use of Government services at post offices is down by 40%, which is disappointing. I do not really foresee a huge improvement in that, because with so many Government services—for instance, on the motor vehicle front—so much is now done online that any operation in that sector would have experienced similar losses. I am much more hopeful about financial services. That sector has grown by 17% since 2012. It is steady, albeit slow, growth year on year. The Post Office has an arrangement with the Bank of Ireland and will be offering more services. Hon. Members have pointed out that bank branches around the country are closing at a swift rate, and that does create an opportunity for the

Post Office. I will be lobbying, alongside Members, for the Post Office to embrace this opportunity even further, but I do think that it is doing a good job. I will sound a note of caution that unfortunately—well not unfortunately, it is just a development that we are all part of—more and more banking is now done online as well, but I do see some grounds for hope in that sector.

I want to talk a bit about WHSmith. A great many WHSmith branches are now either hosting or franchising post office services. Virtually all the services remain on offer to the public in convenient locations. I accept that some—a minority, I think, of 11 out of 61—post offices that operate in WHSmith branches are on the first floor. That does present issues for people with disabilities, but they are issues that the WHSmith branches have resolved in conjunction with local groups representing people with disabilities. They have managed to provide lifts and also, in case of lift breakdown, mobile tills so that people with disabilities can be welcomed into the branches.

**Mr Gareth Thomas:** What about the mutual option?

**Margot James:** On the mutualisation that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, yes, the Postal Services Act 2011 requires that the Post Office be maintained either in public hands—public ownership—or in a mutualised setting. At the moment, it continues in public ownership and we have no plans to change that. Indeed, for it to be mutualised the model would have to be based even greater financial sustainability than it is at the moment. Currently, the Post Office is making losses and we would not be able to mutualise it, but the plan is for it to become more and more financially sustainable over time.

The hon. Member for Luton North also made the point about Royal Mail, and various Members have called for Royal Mail and the Post Office to be reunited. I do not see that happening—Royal Mail is now an independent public company—but thanks to Government investment, the Post Office is now in a far stronger position for its impending negotiations with Royal Mail about its business arrangements. That is thanks to the huge investment that we have made in Royal Mail.

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** Order. Is the Minister going to leave any time?

**Margot James:** I am. Is it time for me to give way? Yes, I do apologise; I was looking at the wrong digit. I will give way now to the hon. Member for Luton North, and I apologise to him.

4.44 pm

**Kelvin Hopkins:** I thank the Minister for giving way. I have very little time, but thank you for chairing the debate this afternoon, Mr Wilson. I also thank all the hon. Members who made such fine, compelling and passionate speeches this afternoon. We are all speaking with one voice. There is a serious threat to the Post Office and to its future, and it has to be rescued now by stopping the cuts. May I ask the Minister that we have a meeting to discuss these things in more depth, with the Front-Bench representatives from each of the Opposition parties and myself, to try to iron out some approach for the future? I have to say that I am rather disappointed with the Minister's response, because she constantly

[Kelvin Hopkins]

4.45 pm

talked about post offices as though they were businesses rather than public services and community assets. If they are to be made more commercially viable, the Government have got to make—

*Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).*



# Written Statements

Thursday 17 November 2016

## COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### Housing Policy

#### **The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell):**

This week it was announced that almost 190,000 new homes were delivered in 2015-16, with over 30,000 of these as a direct result of “change of use”. This is welcome progress but we know that there is more we need to do. That is why we are working on a housing White Paper that will include measures to ensure more land is available in the right places, incentivise and speed up development, encourage a more diverse housing market and deliver support for ordinary working-class people.

The Government are absolutely committed to building more homes and will be making further announcements in due course.

[HCWS267]

## CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

### Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council (21/22 November)

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley):** The Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council will take place in Brussels on 21 and 22 November 2016. Shan Morgan, the UK Deputy Permanent Representative to the EU, will represent the UK at the youth section of the Council. I will represent the UK at both the culture and the sport sections of the Council.

#### *Youth*

The Council will be asked to adopt draft conclusions on promoting new approaches in youth work to uncover and develop the potential of young people. The conclusions will recommend the need to promote effective and innovative cross-sectoral policies that can help young people realise their full potential. The UK intends to support the adoption of the conclusions.

The presentation will be immediately followed by a policy debate on youth engagement.

#### *Culture*

The Council is expected to present a progress report on the proposals for the revised audiovisual media services directive. The audiovisual media services directive seeks to ensure the effective operation of the internal market for television broadcasting services by ensuring the free movement of broadcasting services throughout the EU.

This will be followed by first reading on the proposal for a European year of cultural heritage (2018). The objective of this initiative is to raise awareness of the opportunities that cultural heritage bring, mainly in terms of intercultural dialogue, social cohesion and economic growth. At the same time, the European year aims at drawing attention to the challenges that cultural heritage is facing, including environmental and physical pressure on heritage sites and illicit trafficking of cultural objects. The UK intends to support this proposal.

The Council will then be invited to adopt a proposal to amend the European capitals of culture for the years 2020 to 2033 to extend access to EFTA/EEA countries. The UK Government are supportive of this proposal.

Finally there will be a public debate, “towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations”. This will discuss how the EU and its member states can co-operate to bring about a more strategic approach to culture in external relations.

#### *Sport*

The Council will seek adoption of its draft conclusions on sport diplomacy. The conclusions will acknowledge that sport is a possible tool in supporting intercultural, economic and political co-operation, and that its potential can be part of extending and strengthening contacts between the EU and third countries. The UK intends to support the adoption of these conclusions.

This will be followed by a public debate on the impact of sport on personal development. The UK intervention will be to demonstrate the work the UK is already carrying out in this area through participation, Olympic legacy and the sport strategy.

#### *Other business*

The French delegation will present information on reform of the European copyright framework. This will be followed by the Croatian and Irish delegations on the European capitals of culture 2020. The Italian delegation will then present information on “Facing crisis in Europe: Investing in Culture”.

The Council will also be presented with information on the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) meeting in Glasgow (19-20 November). This information will be provided by the EU member states representatives in WADA: Belgium, UK and Malta. This will be followed by the French delegation on development and specific features of the organisation of European sport. Finally there will be information from the Maltese delegation on the work programme of their incoming presidency.

[HCWS264]

## HEALTH

### NHS Professionals Ltd

**The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne):** My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Lord Prior of Brampton) has made the following written statement:

I am today updating the House on the future of NHS Professionals Ltd (“the Company”).

The Company was set up as a limited company fully owned by the Secretary of State for Health in 2010. While it is the largest single supplier of flexible staffing to the national health service, with a bank of over 90,000 workers providing more than 2 million shifts every year, it currently works with only around a quarter of NHS trusts.

The Department of Health has therefore concluded that the Company requires significant investment to enable it to expand, so it can deliver improved services to even more NHS trusts and reduce their reliance on expensive agency staff—the bill for which is currently £3 billion annually, which diverts resources that could be better used for substantive staffing and improved patient care.

At the moment the Company works with 55 NHS trusts. As the largest provider of bank staff to the NHS, the Company is in a prime position to respond to the NHS's need for more cost-effective and better planned temporary staffing. It currently saves the NHS approximately £70 million a year by supplying bank staff to hospitals which are more affordable than those staff supplied by expensive agencies. We want to see the Company take advantage of this opportunity to expand its business, acting as a true alternative to expensive agencies. But the Company cannot do this without substantial investment to improve the services it offers.

Over the last year the Department has therefore been exploring a range of potential options to help the Company drive further value for the NHS.

Today I can announce that, following market analysis and a thorough appraisal of a business case, the Department's preferred option is to create a joint venture partnership to bring in the necessary investment and expertise to the business and give the Company greater operational autonomy. The Department will sell a majority shareholding so that the Company is run and controlled by the new partner, which will carry the majority of the finance and operating risks of the business.

Contractual mechanisms will be used to ensure that the dual aims of creating a profitable business model while meeting the needs of NHS customers—delivering savings and a high-quality service—are correctly aligned and fully agreed upon.

The Department's retention of a minority shareholding will also ensure there are no significant changes to the agreed purpose and/or objectives of the Company. This is backed up by the right to take back ownership of the Company in the event of any serious breach of the agreed main objectives.

A tendering process to find the right partner is being launched through an advert in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU). Potential investors will be subject to detailed evaluation to ensure value for money to the Government.

There will be no immediate impact on the approximately 600 corporate staff who are employed by the Company. The Company's bank workers will also continue to book and work shifts for NHS trusts as usual.

[HCWS265]

## INTERNATIONAL TRADE

### Department for International Trade (Non-executive Board Members)

**The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox):** I wish to update the House on the appointment of non-executive board members (NEBMs) at the Department for International Trade.

I am pleased to announce to the House that three independent NEBMs have been appointed to sit on our departmental board. A further NEBM has been appointed as chair of the board for UK Export Finance, who will also sit on our departmental board.

Those NEBMs are:

Mr Simon Walker, outgoing director-general of the Institute of Directors, as lead non-executive board member and also chair of the Nominations Committee.

Ms Julie Currie, chief financial and reporting officer at the Lloyds Bank Foundation, who alongside her duties as a non-executive board member will chair the Audit and Risk Committee.

Dr Pippa Malmgren, founder of DRPM Group, a respected political analyst with trade policy experience who will act as a non-executive board member.

Ms Noel Harwerth, current chair of GE Capital Bank Europe, who will join the UK Export Finance Board as chair, and will also be a NEBM on the DIT departmental board.

This is a significant milestone for our Department and I am proud of the talent and expertise represented on the board. Our NEBMs' extensive business knowledge and experience of global trade and corporate governance will be of huge value to me and the Government as we shape the Department and forge the UK's trade agenda and promote the UK as a place to do business with.

The new board members will work closely with me, my ministerial team and the executive team to provide independent scrutiny and advice and to assist the Department in delivering our priorities, which include an effective long-term strategy for the UK's trade policy; promotion of UK exports; inward and outward investment; take-up of UK export finance; and promotion of the UK through the GREAT campaign. They will also advise on performance and the effective management of the Department.

These appointments come at the end of a highly competitive process. We launched our search for NEBMs in July through advertisements on the Centre for Public Appointments and Women on Boards websites. We received 181 applications, including exceptionally well-qualified individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, demonstrating the high level of interest there is in international trade.

[HCWS263]

## WORK AND PENSIONS

### Housing Benefit and Universal Credit

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes):** Following the recent Supreme Court judgments relating to the removal of the spare room subsidy, and to ensure the facts of the cases are fully understood, I would draw colleagues' attention to the following entry in *Hansard*:

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2016-11-14/debates/D5D5E72C-3772-46E6-8A4F-15A8F8EBA19A/Under-OccupancyCharge>

[HCWS266]

# ORAL ANSWERS

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