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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 16 March 2017

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

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

Leaving the EU: Creative Industries

1. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on funding for the creative industries. [909283]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): Before I start, I remind the House that, as per today's Order Paper, I plan to make a statement on the proposed merger of 21st Century Fox and Sky after business questions, so I will not answer any questions on the subject during oral questions this morning, but I will of course be happy to do so at the Dispatch Box later.

We have been engaging with representatives from across the creative industries to understand the potential impact and opportunities of the UK's decision to leave the EU, including on funding. The Treasury has announced that it will guarantee funding for structural and investment fund projects between the time we leave the EU and 2020.

Nick Smith: Blaenau Gwent has been the filming location for everything from "Wrath of the Titans" and "Doctor Who" to "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy". I am keen for the British film industry to thrive after Brexit, so will the Government negotiate for the UK to stay in Creative Europe, the vital film funding programme which our brilliant British Film Institute helps hold together?

Karen Bradley: I join the hon. Gentleman in praising Blaenau Gwent. I also praise not only all the parts of Wales that are used as filming locations for some fantastic films and television programmes, but the studios in Cardiff where many great programmes, including "Doctor Who", are filmed. I am aware of the views about Creative Europe, and we are looking at all the European funds and making decisions about the appropriate response from the United Kingdom to those funds after we leave the European Union.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's recognition of the importance to the creative industries of their ability to license on an

exclusively territorial basis. Will she ensure that that message gets across to the UK permanent representation in Brussels so that it argues that case as strongly as possible while we remain in the EU?

Karen Bradley: I can say categorically yes. My right hon. Friend's point is one reason why people were concerned about our membership of the EU and one of the things that led to the vote on 23 June last year.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Leaving the EU could affect not only funding, but the growth of the creative industries, which contribute £87.1 billion a year—£160,000 a minute—to the UK's economy. What safeguards is the Secretary of State putting in place to protect this currently thriving sector of UK plc?

I also want to take this opportunity to put on the record my enormous thanks to the Secretary of State and her team for bringing forward "ban the bots" legislation and taking on board all the recommendations of the Waterson report.

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Lady for that comment. The two of us first met to discuss the matter probably about three years ago when I was a Home Office Minister and had responsibility for it through the organised crime portfolio. She has campaigned long and hard to achieve this result. She and my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) deserve great credit for the fact that we have reached this point.

The hon. Lady rightly says that the creative industries are a great British success story, which is one reason why they are mentioned explicitly in our industrial strategy Green Paper. It is worth saying that the creative industries are a success because they are truly global. The European Union is not the only market that they look at; they look across the whole world, and I want to ensure that they continue to be a success.

Mr Speaker: We are very grateful.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that there has been cross-fertilisation of creative and artistic talent among all the peoples of Europe for at least several millennia, and that there is no reason to suppose that that will stop once we leave the European Union?

Karen Bradley: I will take your hint about brevity, Mr Speaker, and say yes.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): All across Europe, our competitors in the creative industries are ready to pounce, believing that Brexit uncertainty is their opportunity. By refusing to guarantee the residency rights of EU nationals this week, does the Secretary of State realise that the Government have once again shown themselves to be a poor champion for those in this and so many other sectors in the UK?

Karen Bradley: We have had debates about EU nationals at length in this House and in the other place. We have been clear that we want early certainty not only for EU nationals here in the UK, but for UK nationals in

Europe. It is incredibly important that we get that reciprocal arrangement as soon as possible so that we can give that certainty.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware that the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport recently visited Belfast, where we were able to visit the “Game of Thrones” set. We asked about the EU contribution to the Northern Ireland creative industries and, to my surprise, EU funding as such did not come up but access to a UK talent pool did. Does she therefore believe that Government investment should be focused on building that talent pool?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is exactly right. We need to make sure that we have the skills and talent here in the UK and that we attract the brightest and best from around the world. I look forward to visiting Northern Ireland. A few political issues are stopping me doing so at the moment, but as soon as they are resolved I will make that visit.

Leaving the EU: Charities and Voluntary Sector

2. **Susan Elan Jones** (Clwyd South) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on charities and voluntary organisations. [909284]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr Rob Wilson): The Government are assessing the impact of leaving the EU on the voluntary and community sector. We are in ongoing discussions about the challenges and opportunities that leaving the EU presents, and I encourage charities to raise specific concerns with relevant lead Departments. We will continue to work with the sector and with devolved Administrations, including the Welsh Assembly, as we plan our exit from the EU.

Susan Elan Jones: I thank the Minister for his response and I place on record that I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on charities and volunteering. He will be aware that this is a serious situation, with somewhere between £350 million and £450 million being seen as the Brexit shortfall, and that does not include match funding. Can we have some assurances that there will be a long-term strategy, and not just in terms of current funding?

Mr Wilson: I thank the hon. Lady for her work on the all-party group, which obviously has support both inside and outside this House and is of great benefit to the sector. On working with the sector on funding, leaving the EU means that we will want to make our own decisions on how we deliver the policy objectives previously targeted by EU funding. For projects signed after the 2016 autumn statement, funding will be honoured by the Treasury after we leave the EU if it provides strong value for money and is in line with domestic priorities.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): According to the Directory of Social Change, the money that charities get from the EU amounts to some 0.5% of the sector’s income. Does my hon. Friend agree that the opportunities afforded by the Government’s proposals to access dormant funds will go a long way towards covering any shortfall in funding from the EU, and might exceed it?

Mr Wilson: Indeed, I do. Last year, according to the Charity Commission, the sector received about £73 billion in income. The Government have a number of funding mechanisms that are aiding the sector now, and £5 billion of tax reliefs and other support is in place to make sure that the charity sector can go from strength to strength.

7. [909290] **Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations conducted a survey last month on the impact of Brexit on the charity and voluntary sector in Scotland. Some 40% of charities are concerned about their networks and collaborations with other EU charities. What will the Minister do to reassure Scottish charities, and indeed charities across the United Kingdom, that those networks and collaborations will be protected post-Brexit?

Mr Wilson: Charity legislation is devolved from the EU, so it is a UK responsibility, and within the UK responsibility for charity legislation is devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Government are listening very closely to all parts of civil society across the UK, and we will be working closely with them to make sure that we have a long-term plan and a long-term strategy.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab): The Brexit Secretary tells us that he has done no work to understand the implications for the country of a no-deal Brexit. What work has the Minister done to understand the implications of a no-deal Brexit for charities, not just in terms of funding but in terms of the sector’s extremely diverse workforce?

Mr Wilson: There is an enormous amount of ongoing work, and we recognise that civil society organisations have a wide range of important views on Brexit. We have chaired a number of roundtables with representatives from the sector, and we are working very closely with the sector. As I said in a previous answer, we have a long-term plan and strategy to make sure that the sector is supported.

Superfast Broadband

3. **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What support her Department is giving local authorities to achieve superfast broadband coverage targets. [909285]

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): I can tell the House that independent figures show that superfast broadband is now available to 92.5% of UK premises; we are on track to meet our manifesto commitment of 95% by the end of the year.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. The superfast roll-out in Northamptonshire is ahead of schedule, but what reassurance can he give to my constituents in the most difficult-to-reach areas, particularly those who find themselves on county boundaries, that they will soon benefit from this roll-out, too?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend’s support for the Digital Economy Bill means that the universal service obligation to bring high-speed broadband to every premise in the UK is getting closer to reality. Not only that, but because of the take-up of superfast broadband, every

person in Northamptonshire who takes it up also helps to get the roll-out to go further, because more money goes back into the system to provide more connection.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It is shameful that seven out of the 10 UK communities with the slowest broadband download speeds are in Wales. Abererch in Dwyfor is bottom of that league, with a speed of 2.7 megabits per second. Llanymawddwy in Meirionnydd was promised broadband by this spring, but BT backed out last month. Will the Minister join me in asking when the Labour Welsh Government will speed up their act on broadband?

Matt Hancock: Of course the delivery of the broadband contract in Wales is a matter for the Welsh Government, but they have made some progress on this recently and we have been working together. The geography of Wales means that the roll-out there is harder, but that does not mean we should not get to everybody with high-speed broadband by the end of the decade. I hope that the hon. Lady's support for the Digital Economy Bill will help to make that happen.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): In my village of Tholthorpe, 12 of 100 houses have not been enabled for superfast broadband, although the rest have. Openreach could solve this problem by the simple deployment of a wireless connection, but it refused to do so. The Minister met me to discuss this, so does he agree that contractors taking public money should use all means at their disposal to solve these problems?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I do.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that often, even though the Government may say they have met their targets and the broadband providers will say that they have got fantastic speeds, people in their house or in their business will experience speeds that are much, much slower and nowhere near what the Government are promising? I am not attacking the Government in saying this; I am simply trying to get reality into the equation, so that people in their homes and in their businesses can get proper superfast broadband.

Matt Hancock: Working with the hon. Gentleman on this subject has been unusually enjoyable, because he is not making party political points on this one; he has been working hard for his constituents and we have been engaged in serious correspondence. The truth is that we use independent figures on the roll-out, but a lot of people do not take up the broadband that is available to them.

Mr Speaker: We are immensely grateful to the Minister. I would call the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) on this question if he were standing, but if he does not stand, I will not do so.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am glad to say that he is standing, so I call Mr David Rutley.

8. [909291] **David Rutley** (Macclesfield) (Con): It is good to be able to ask this question, so thank you for the

opportunity, Mr Speaker. I welcome the steps the Secretary of State is taking to improve broadband services across the country and in communities across our borders—I am very grateful for that work. Will the Minister tell the House more about the full-fibre connection vouchers that were detailed in the Budget Red Book? How will they assist businesses in our rural communities?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I can. In the Budget we announced that we are going to have a full-fibre business voucher. This means that businesses will be able to access a voucher to help provide a full-fibre connection, giving gigabit speeds. The first wave of projects will be towards the end of this year or the start of next year, and I look forward to working with my hon. Friend on implementing that deal.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Does the Minister think that this super-duper broadband, which is relatively new to me, will be able to expose, even more so, the Tory election fraud covering 20 seats? What a wonderful idea!

Matt Hancock: I thought that even the hon. Gentleman was going to join in this non-partisan celebration of connectivity, but unfortunately he could not resist.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): Data from the House of Commons Library show that the rural Higham and Pendleside ward in my constituency suffers some of the worst levels of broadband, with a quarter of residents experiencing absolutely pathetic download speeds. Will my right hon. Friend get his Department to sit down with Superfast Lancashire and Openreach to find a way forward for that ward?

Matt Hancock: Yes, we are making some progress in Lancashire, but there is much more to do. I hope that my hon. Friend's support for the Digital Economy Bill and the universal service obligation will help to make sure that we can connect everybody in Lancashire with a decent speed over the next couple of years.

Broadcasting: Diversity

4. **Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to encourage diversity in broadcasting. [909287]

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): We are firmly committed to improving diversity and social mobility in broadcasting, as we are in all other areas of the creative industries. Next week, we will host the first ever formal diversity forum at the Abbey Road Studios, bringing together people from music, film, theatre, broadcasting and sport to build a country that works for everyone.

Kate Green: Will the Minister update the House on the discussions he is having and the progress that is being made on securing minimum levels of access—subtitling, signing and audio description—in on-demand services?

Matt Hancock: We have made some progress with on-demand services, and the broadcasters do a very good job of making sure that subtitling is available.

Technology has obviously changed the way people consume video, and a lot more of it is on-demand, so we are going to introduce rules to ensure that on-demand gets the same sort of subtitling.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): In October last year, the BBC “Look North” reporter Danny Carpenter was suspended for making vile comments about the Government, relating them to a Nazi regime. I have written several letters to the BBC to find out how its investigations are coming along, but it has not given me an answer. Does the Minister agree that although we agree with diversity of opinion and views in broadcasting, the BBC should take action regarding Mr Carpenter to prevent the recurrence of such ridiculous bias?

Matt Hancock: We rightly do not have direct Government regulation of the BBC regarding such matters, and I think that is appropriate. Nevertheless, through the new charter we are introducing Ofcom as the regulator. That will be the case once the Digital Economy Bill becomes law, after which it will be for Ofcom to regulate the BBC, and the BBC’s board will ultimately be responsible for making sure it gets these judgments right.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): In a previous DCMS questions, the Minister of State told the House that he had chosen four white males for the Channel 4 board and rejected a well-qualified BAME woman because he rejected tokenism. However, this week the Secretary of State failed to appoint a BBC governor to represent Wales because she could not get her way and appoint a woman who was not assessed as the best candidate. Is not the only diversity here that between the Secretary of State and the Minister of State, who thinks he should be the Secretary of State?

Matt Hancock: No. On the Welsh appointment to Wales, it is a great pity that although the Welsh Government had a representative on the panel who signed off the appointability of the candidate, the Welsh Minister then decided not to appoint. Given that the Welsh Government agreed that the candidate in question was appointable, it would be far better for the appointment to be made.

Creative Industries: Skills

5. **Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab):** What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on skills shortages in the creative industries. [909288]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues about the UK’s creative industries, and I am pleased that the creative industries are at the heart of the Government’s work on building our industrial strategy. The Green Paper includes an early sector review of the creative industries, which will be led by Sir Peter Bazalgette. It is critical that our world-leading creative industries have access to the skills they need, and that is one of the three themes of Sir Peter’s review.

Joan Ryan: I do not know whether the Secretary of State is aware, but there is an acute skills shortage in the creative industries. The simplest way to change that is through apprenticeships. However, there are insufficient

training establishments and not enough support for relevant small and medium-sized enterprises compared with, say, construction or engineering, and there is absolutely no history of training apprenticeships in the industry. Is the Secretary of State aware of those problems? What is she doing about them?

Karen Bradley: I am very aware of those problems. Structural issues with the creative industries have prevented apprenticeships from being included in the past. As part of the work of the Creative Industries Council, we have a specific workstream on skills, and I am in discussions with the Department for Education about how we get those apprenticeship opportunities.

Charities and Voluntary Sector: Funding

6. **Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con):** What steps her Department is taking to increase the number of funding sources available for charities and voluntary organisations. [909289]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr Rob Wilson): I have been reforming the charities sector and widening its strength and depth as part of a long-term plan. There are a number of sources of finance. Most recently, the Dormant Assets Commission has reported that there might be up to £2 billion of additional dormant assets, which could be transformational for the sector.

Peter Aldous: I am grateful to the Minister for his reply. In Suffolk, the Community First Endowment Match Challenge was extremely successful in leveraging local donations for grassroots causes, with private giving matched to almost three times the initial donation. Will the Minister meet me and the Suffolk Community Foundation to discuss how such an endowment challenge might be reintroduced?

Mr Wilson: I am very pleased to hear about the Suffolk foundation’s success. The Community First Endowment Match Challenge raised a permanent endowment of £130 million, which has provided £5.8 million in grants to local groups up to the end of 2015. It will continue to support local community groups and projects across England in the future. There are no plans to expand this programme in the current Parliament, but I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this further and, in due course, to see whether we can consider how dormant assets are spent.

Mr Speaker: I call Stewart Malcolm McDonald. Not here. Oh dear, where is the feller?

Access to the Arts

10. **Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab):** What assessment she has made of the access working-class people have to the arts. [909293]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): We seem to have moved on very quickly, Mr Speaker.

The Government are committed to ensuring that the arts are accessible to everyone, regardless of their background, and not just to the privileged few. That is

why the Government's culture White Paper, which was published a year ago this month, sets out a range of commitments to increase access and participation, including a new cultural citizens programme for young people.

Justin Madders: Will the Secretary of State read the report on access to the professions by the all-party group on social mobility, which I chair? During our evidence sessions, we heard a great deal about how many young people are completely denied access to the arts and media because they are not prepared, or cannot afford, to take a series of unpaid work placements. That is really limiting access, so will the Secretary of State seriously consider the report's recommendation of banning unpaid internships lasting more than one month?

Karen Bradley: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his work on the all-party group; I will look carefully at the points that he has made. This Government have done much to change the culture of unpaid internships. I for one have never taken on an unpaid intern; I have always made sure that there is fair recompense for people who make a valuable contribution to my office.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the Royal Opera House regularly screens performances right around the country—I am particularly familiar with the ballet—which means that anyone can see them locally, without having to come to London.

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. The screening of the Royal Opera House's productions across the country has widened access. I feel very strongly that we should have fantastic regional arts. Last Friday, I saw some fantastic arts in Hull, the city of culture. That amazing work was about ensuring that the arts were getting to everybody.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State look at some of the work that we did when I chaired the Education Committee on young people's access to the arts, including access to museums? What we found was that if a child from a more deprived background did not go on a school visit, they did not go at all, whereas middle-class children went with their parents. It is vital that we encourage schools to take kids to the arts and to museums.

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. This Government made a manifesto commitment to keep free access to museums to ensure that access is available to young people, whatever their background.

Arts and Culture: Local Authority Funding

11. **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What steps she is taking to mitigate the effect on the provision of arts and culture of future changes in local authority budgets. [909294]

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): Local authorities should recognise the huge benefits that investing in arts and culture can bring. Many already do, and are building successful partnerships to deliver arts and culture, and to develop new models of working together.

Paul Blomfield: The Government really ought to recognise the importance of investing in local authorities to deliver these services but, given the crisis in their funding, philanthropic giving is playing an increasingly important role. The Minister will be aware, I think, of the success of "Going Public", which is a Museums Sheffield initiative on private giving. Will he agree to meet me and Museums Sheffield to discuss what more can be done on that front?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I would be delighted to, not least because the best local authorities are increasing their investment in arts and culture, as they see its value in strengthening the sense of place and ensuring that arts are available to all. There is no excuse for not doing so.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): An innovative new organisation called Arts Taunton has just been established in my constituency to infiltrate art and culture into every aspect of our lives, including the new garden town. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this sector should have an equal weighting with other sectors and, indeed, that it can not only raise spirits, but benefit the economy?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is exactly right. I commend initiatives such as Arts Taunton for embedding arts, culture and creativity in all aspects of life. It is incredibly important that people of all ages have the opportunity to participate and are encouraged to do so.

Youth Football Contracts

12. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What discussions she has had with football associations on the status of youth football contracts. [909295]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I am aware of concerns relating to youth football contracts in Scotland and have followed up the matter with the English football authorities in the light of this question. In relation to youth football in Scotland, I understand that the Scottish Government are discussing these matters with a range of stakeholders, including the football authorities, clubs, the Professional Footballers Association Scotland, and the Children's Commissioner for Scotland.

Alan Brown: I thank the Minister for that answer. I presume that she is aware that the Realgrassroots campaign group has highlighted that some football clubs pay as little as £1 a week for youth football players who do 30 hours' work. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has named and shamed those clubs, but will the Minister confirm what she will do to end this exploitation?

Tracey Crouch: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that this is a devolved issue, but I understand that the Scottish Government have emphasised strongly to the Scottish Football Association and the Scottish Professional Football League that concerns must be taken seriously. We obviously take the duty of care to youngsters incredibly seriously and continue to look at this.

Broadband: Rural Communities

13. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What steps she is taking to improve broadband speeds in rural areas. [909297]

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): We are on track, as we mentioned, to deliver 95% access to superfast broadband for UK homes and businesses. By 2020, we will introduce a universal service obligation to bring high-speed broadband to all parts of our country, including the most far-flung.

Mr Carmichael: Far-flung places such as London, if you start your journey in Orkney, Mr Speaker.

Faroese Telecom has a bold and exciting proposal to improve connectivity in Scotland's islands communities, but it is in fact thwarted at every turn by Ofcom regulation. Will the Minister agree to meet me and a delegation from the islands and Faroese Telecom to discuss how we could use Ofcom as an enabler rather than an obstructer?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I would be delighted to. I am more familiar than I would ever have expected to be with Faroese Telecom's policy because of how it has managed to roll out connectivity to the whole of those islands, and we should see whether we can do that for some of the islands in Scotland. Of course, the roll-out of superfast broadband in Scotland is done through the Scottish Government. They have been much, much slower than almost every other part of the UK—much slower than the Labour Welsh Government—but I am sure that, together, we can ensure that we bring the country together by delivering good connectivity.

Channel 4

14. **Graham Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): When she plans to make an announcement on the future status of Channel 4. [909299]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): In due course.

Graham Jones: Brevity.

The question about privatisation is this: ITV's profits are 26% of turnover, and Channel 4 has a £1 billion turnover. Are the Government seriously considering privatising Channel 4 and taking a quarter of its income for programming away?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman knows that in a fast-changing and challenging broadcasting environment, the Government want to ensure that Channel 4 has a strong and secure future, and that it can provide for audiences and support creative industries around the UK. I am looking at a broad range of options and, as I have said, I will report in due course.

Review of Stakes and Prizes

15. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): When she plans to publish the review of stakes and prizes. [909300]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): The Government announced a review of gaming machines and social responsibility measures, which will cover fixed odds betting terminals, on 24 October, and we expect to publish our findings in the spring.

Patricia Gibson: Will the Minister reassure the House that firm action will be taken against fixed odds betting terminals—the so-called crack cocaine of gambling? In my constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran and the neighbouring one, there are 135 of these machines, on which a vulnerable player can lose £100 in a mere 20 seconds. Will the Government protect the vulnerable by capping the machines' maximum gambling stake at £2?

Tracey Crouch: This is all part of the review. The hon. Lady does not have long to wait to find out what we will recommend in that review.

Topical Questions

T1. [909301] **Natalie McGarry** (Glasgow East) (Ind): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): Since we last had oral questions to my Department, it has launched the Government's digital strategy, which will ensure that we have the infrastructure, regulation and skills that we need to build a world-leading digital economy that works for everyone. The Dormant Assets Commission identified a potential £2 billion in such assets, which could open up new streams of funding for good causes, and we are considering the best way to proceed on that. I visited South Korea for the third Korea-UK Creative Industries Forum, launched the UK-Korea year of culture, and signed a joint statement on co-operating on the content industry. Finally, I am sure that at least most Members will join me in wishing the England team well this weekend in their attempt to break New Zealand's record for the most consecutive wins in top-level rugby.

Natalie McGarry: To echo what my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) said, the Secretary of State will be well aware that the maximum stake on fixed odds betting terminals is £100, which is 50 times the permitted cap on other high-street fruit machines. That particularly affects areas of severe deprivation, as there is great proliferation of these machines on high streets in such areas right across the UK. Does the Secretary of State recognise that that is an anomaly in gambling regulation and that far tougher regulation is required?

Karen Bradley: As the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), just said, we will make an announcement on this in the spring.

T5. [909308] **Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): I know that you are a tennis fan, Mr Speaker, but women's cricket is going from strength to strength. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Somerset county cricket ground on being selected as one of just four

locations to host the international women's world cup this year? The big match to get to is England v. Sri Lanka, which is on Sunday 2 July. I shall be there, and you are warmly invited, Mr Speaker, as are all the ministerial team.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I am sure that we all share my hon. Friend's excitement at the women's cricket world cup returning to England this summer. We are not alone in looking forward to the tournament; I understand that a record number of tickets have been sold for the final at Lord's, which is great news. Hon. Members may be interested to know that the first games of the tournament will coincide with Women's Sport Week, which will provide further opportunities to celebrate women's sport and encourage participation.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) is permanently excited, not only about matters of sport, but about all matters under the sun, as far as I can tell.

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State feel bound by the 2015 Conservative party manifesto?

Karen Bradley: Yes.

Mr Watson: Ah, very good. That is interesting, because that manifesto promised to lift the number of women on sports' governing bodies to 25% by 2017, but it is 2017 already, and we have not achieved that. Did the Secretary of State think that nobody would notice, or, like the Chancellor on national insurance, did she not bother to read the manifesto?

Karen Bradley: We will be at 30% in 2017, which exceeds the manifesto commitment, because of the Government's work on reforming sports governance, and our work with governing bodies to make sure that we have the right diversity and representation on those bodies.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Suicide is the leading cause of death of young people and the biggest killer of men under 50. The Secretary of State will know that there are clear links between certain types of media reporting and an increase in suicide rates. Will she join me in commending the work done by Samaritans through its media guidelines, and its tireless work to reduce suicide rates? Will she meet me to discuss the findings in the Health Committee's report on preventing suicide, which is out today, given the role of the media, social media and the internet, and to discuss what we can do to reduce rates?

Karen Bradley: I commend my hon. Friend for her work on the Health Committee and look forward to reading the report. She is right that the media have an incredibly important role in helping to prevent suicides, not to cause them. I will, of course, sit down with her to discuss the matter.

T2. [909302] **Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab):** Is the Minister aware that more than 300 local newspapers have closed in the past 10 years? While Members might

enjoy reading about skateboarding ducks, such newspapers are also a critical part of our democracy. Will the Minister therefore join me in supporting the National Union of Journalists in its "Local News Matters" campaign and week, and will he meet the union to discuss this critical part of our democracy?

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): Absolutely. Local newspapers are incredibly important. As constituency MPs we all engage with them, as well as with the national media. I will be happy to meet the NUJ and take part in the week, as the hon. Gentleman suggests.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Ely cathedral has benefited from funding for essential building work from the first world war centenary cathedral repairs fund. The cathedral makes a significant and real contribution to community life. What future long-term funding is there for cathedrals?

Tracey Crouch: I was delighted recently to announce additional funding for many cathedrals around the country, including Ely. Cathedrals play an important part in our appreciation of heritage in the United Kingdom, so we continue to support the Heritage Lottery Fund to ensure that it continues to invest in cathedrals and other buildings of great importance.

T3. [909305] **Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op):** S4C is a much-loved Welsh language public service broadcaster that was hard fought for. I am sure that the Ministers on the Treasury Bench—and you, Mr Speaker—watch it whenever they are in Wales. What are the Government doing to safeguard the future prominence of public service broadcasters, especially with regard to nations' services?

Matt Hancock: The prominence of PSBs is important. We are ensuring that S4C gets the funding that it needs—more than £6 million last year and more than £6 million next year. We have repeatedly made it clear that we strongly support S4C, which was a great Tory invention.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): In a woeful performance before the Home Affairs Committee earlier this week, managers from Google, Twitter and Facebook admitted that they do virtually nothing proactively to reduce hate speech, extremism or child abuse from being hosted on their sites. Is it not time that we proactively pursued a policy similar to German proposals that would see social media companies penalised with large fines if they failed to take down such sites within 24 hours, or to prevent them in the first place?

Tracey Crouch: I saw my hon. Friend's comments about this in the newspapers this morning, and I reassure him that the Government are determined to do everything that we can to stamp out hate crime, which has absolutely no place in society. We have some of the strongest legislation on hate crime, and we expect social media companies to respond quickly to incidents of abusive behaviour on their networks. However, there is much more that we can do. We have just announced work on an internet safety strategy, which I will take forward

with other colleagues, that is aimed at making Britain the safest country in the world for children and young people online.

T4. [909306] **Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Many of my constituents have contacted me with concerns about children and young people accessing extreme internet pornography. Will the Minister tell me what the Government are doing to work with Ofcom and internet service providers to protect children and young people?

Matt Hancock: This is an important point. The Digital Economy Bill brings forward age verification processes so that all pornography cannot be accessed by those under the age of 18. ISPs will be required to block sites that do not put such age verification in place—that is incredibly important. The Bill is in the Lords at the moment but it will come back to this House shortly.

Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con): I add my excitement to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), because the women's cricket world cup will actually launch in Derby. I recently discovered my inner warrior when playing rugby with England Rugby and my local Derby team—in fact, I made my first tackle—so will the Secretary of State tell me what we are doing to encourage more women to play sports?

Karen Bradley: I know from personal experience that Derby has fantastic sporting opportunities for everyone. It is incredibly important that more women play sport and feel that they can take part. The “This Girl Can” campaign, for which I am sure my hon. Friend has seen the television advertisements, is part of that, as is the fantastic women's cricket world cup. I know that one of the matches is in Derby, but I have to confess that I am going to the one in Leicester.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Following on from the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), I met Realgrassroots, which explained that it had been campaigning against the exploitation of young footballers since 2010 and that the Scottish Parliament is investigating the issue. Will the sports Minister meet me to discuss it further, and commit to ensuring that football clubs abide by basic employment legislation, the enforcement of which is reserved?

Tracey Crouch: I am always delighted to meet honourable colleagues, and I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman, too.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Great Repeal Bill

1. **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union on the requirement for legislative consent motions for the proposed great repeal Bill. [909271]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): I have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues, including with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, on various issues of importance

to the Government. The Government will publish the great repeal Bill in due course, and the content of the Bill will determine the process to take it forward.

Marion Fellows: Last month, the Secretary of State for Scotland confirmed that a legislative consent motion would be required from the Scottish Parliament for the great repeal Bill, but in his answer just now the Attorney General stopped well short of that. If the UK Government's position is the same as the Secretary of State for Scotland's, will a legislative consent motion be required?

The Attorney General: The hon. Lady tempts me to explore what will be in the great repeal Bill. I am not going to do that, but she knows, and I am sure her colleagues know, that if the Bill affects the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament or the executive competence of the Scottish Government, there will need to be a legislative consent motion.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend share my concern that people might be slightly misled by our referring to the proposed Bill as the great repeal Bill? Although it will repeal the European Communities Act 1972, it is actually the great continuity Bill, because its other purpose is to transfer the body of EU law into UK law.

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. He is right to say that this Bill will repeal the 1972 Act, and that is a significant step in this country's history, but it will also, as he says, make sure that we do not have huge amounts of disruptive change for business, industry and individuals, and we will try to make sure that there is as much continuity on the day after departure as there was on the day before departure, where that is feasible.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Does the Attorney General envisage that there will be consent motions under EVEL provisions in respect of any of the potential clauses in the great repeal Bill?

The Attorney General: Again, we shall have to wait and see the content of the Bill, but it is unlikely—given what is likely to be in the Bill, and given the purpose of the Bill—that we will be looking at very many areas, if any at all, that do not affect the entire United Kingdom.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Can the Attorney General clarify whether any of the devolved Administrations effectively have a legal veto over our decision to leave the European Union?

The Attorney General: I can, and they do not.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Can the right hon. and learned Gentleman confirm that the Bill will not be called the great repeal Bill?

The Attorney General: I suspect that we will find a rather more technical title for the Bill when it comes forward.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): I must admit to being confused by the Attorney General's answers. Clearly, the great repeal Bill, as indicated by

the Supreme Court, will affect devolved competences. The Secretary of State for Scotland has said an LCM is required. Why are the Government hesitant? Can the Attorney General not be clear? Will an LCM be required for the great repeal Bill, because it affects devolved competences?

The Attorney General: The Supreme Court was not deciding on this Bill; it was deciding on a Bill that the Government have now passed, and which I hope will receive Royal Assent very shortly. However, in relation to the contents of this Bill, whatever it ends up being called, the hon. Gentleman will have to be patient and wait until we see it. As I set out to his colleagues, there is a clear set of expectations as to when LCMs will be required, and the Government will honour those expectations.

Economic Crime

2. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that the Crown Prosecution Service has adequate resources to tackle serious fraud and other economic crimes. [909272]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The Crown Prosecution Service anticipated increases in complex cases such as fraud ahead of the last spending review, and there was indeed a 14% increase in fraud and forgery cases last year, but, importantly, the conviction rate stayed stable at 86%.

Diana Johnson: With a third of the workforce cut since 2010—400 prosecutors and 1,000 administrators and caseworkers—does the Solicitor General really consider that the CPS is able to deal with these complex fraud and economic cases, and will not any further cuts leave it in a really bad state to prosecute?

The Solicitor General: I assure the hon. Lady that the allocation of resources for the prosecution of fraud has increased within the CPS. There are now over 200 specialist fraud prosecutors, not just here in London but across the country in important regional centres, and that number is set to increase to 250 in the months ahead, so the CPS is really placing an important priority on this.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Does the Solicitor General agree that the work of the Crown Prosecution Service in this area is very much complemented in cases of really serious economic fraud by the work of the Serious Fraud Office, which has been transformed under the leadership of David Green, resulting in the recovery of over £500 million of ill-gotten gains? Does he agree that the model of the Serious Fraud Office does this country great credit and will be of increasing value to us in future?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to the Chairman of the Justice Committee. He is right to highlight the recent successes of the SFO in collecting millions of pounds for the taxpayer as a result of deferred prosecution agreements. I think the Roskill model, which brings together investigators and prosecutors in one unit, works very well.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Picking up on the point made by the Chairman of the Select Committee, does not the existence of the Serious Fraud Office reduce pressure on the Crown Prosecution Service in terms of prosecuting big-ticket economic crime? Will the Solicitor General therefore guarantee that the Serious Fraud Office will continue to exist as it is and will not be merged with the Crown Prosecution Service or the National Crime Agency?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman knows that the Government are at all times under a duty to review the mechanism by which we tackle economic crime, because it is a question not just of criminality but of national security. The Government are therefore right to examine the situation. As I said, I think the Roskill model works extremely well.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I did not detect a guarantee in that answer. A month ago, the Solicitor General praised the work of the director of the Serious Fraud Office and how he had enhanced the role of the Serious Fraud Office in our national life. I know that the hon. and learned Gentleman has fine persuasive skills, so if he will not give a guarantee, will he at least undertake to go to see the Prime Minister to speak about the advantages of the Serious Fraud Office and having investigatory and prosecuting services under one roof?

The Solicitor General: I am happy to indicate to the hon. Gentleman that I have regular conversations with ministerial colleagues about all these issues. I praise David Green for the work he has done in leading the SFO. I will continue to make the case for the Roskill model.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I suspect that those who have the necessary financial expertise to investigate, uncover, prosecute and prove complex financial fraud will probably get paid a lot more in the private sector working for business or the City. What can the Solicitor General do to ensure that the right people with the right skills are retained by the CPS and the SFO?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend knows that the SFO operates a model of funding that means it can be quite flexible as regards particular investigations. The important point is that we get the right people with the right specific expertise in particular types of serious fraud. Flexibility is the most important principle.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Everybody knows that there is a lot of hot money in the London high-end residential market, especially coming from Russia, and there are extensive reporting regulations on financial advisers and agents, so why have there been so few prosecutions for money laundering in this area?

The Solicitor General: I share my hon. Friend's concern about this. He will be glad to know that the provisions in the Criminal Finances Bill, which I hope will become law very soon, will enhance the powers of prosecutors and investigators in going after ill-gotten gains with new measures such as unexplained wealth orders, which will help us to deal with the perpetrators of this type of fraud.

Domestic Violence

3. **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service in prosecuting cases of domestic violence. [909273]

9. **Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service in prosecuting cases of domestic violence. [909281]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The Prime Minister has recently restated her personal, and the Government's collective, commitment to tackling domestic violence and abuse. My colleagues in Cabinet and I will work together to take that forward. That work will include considering how we can support the CPS in bringing prosecutions against perpetrators of domestic violence.

Paul Blomfield: Ashiana, which is a great Sheffield charity working on domestic violence in the black, Asian, minority ethnic and refugee communities, has raised its concerns with me over the appallingly low prosecution rates for female genital mutilation and honour-based violence. The Attorney General will know that there have been no successful prosecutions for FGM. I am sure he shares my concern about that, but what is he going to do about it?

The Attorney General: I do share the hon. Gentleman's concern about that. He may be aware that there are often considerable evidential difficulties in proving these offences in court, but that does not mean that we should not bring appropriate cases before criminal courts and seek to gain convictions. The Crown Prosecution Service will continue to do that. In relation to domestic violence more broadly, he may know that the volume and conviction rate of prosecutions are rising, on the basis of the last year for which we have figures compared with the year before, but he is right to point out specific areas where we need to do better.

Mike Kane: Survivors of domestic abuse in my constituency in the excellent Safe Spots group tell me that right out of the gate, they cannot access the criminal justice system because they have to pay a discretionary fee to their doctor for a note to access legal aid, which can cost up to £175. Will the Attorney General consider talking to his Department of Health colleagues about whether we can scrap this fee for those people?

The Attorney General: I will certainly explore the issue that the hon. Gentleman raises. I think he is indicating that there are a number of different things that we need to do to support those who are victims of domestic violence. This is not solely a criminal justice issue, but if people are to access the criminal justice system, we need to do as much as we can to make the process as easy it possibly can be for them. If victims of domestic violence are unwilling to give evidence, that should not necessarily be the end of a prosecution. We have seen recently with the use of body-worn video cameras that the police can sometimes give evidence that can secure a conviction, even if the victim is not prepared to give evidence.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): Will the Attorney General work with the Justice Secretary to ensure that changes to the law on domestic abusers cross-examining their victims are fit for purpose, and that they adequately protect victims in our family courts?

The Attorney General: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend. He will know that in a criminal context, courts already have the authority to stop alleged domestic violence perpetrators cross-examining their alleged victims directly. Family courts need to have such a power, too. He will know, I am sure, that the Government intend to make sure that they do have that power, and I understand that that will form part of a Bill that will come before the House very shortly.

Violence Against Women and Girls

4. **Amanda Solloway** (Derby North) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to increase the number of prosecutions for violence against women and girls. [909274]

5. **Lucy Frazer** (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to increase the number of prosecutions for violence against women and girls. [909276]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The CPS is prosecuting and convicting more defendants of domestic abuse, rape, sexual offences and child sexual abuse than ever before. Under the cross-Government violence against women and girls strategy, the CPS has committed to a number of actions between now and 2020 to ensure the effective prosecution of these offences.

Amanda Solloway: What is the CPS doing in the Derbyshire area to ensure that more perpetrators of violence against women and girls are brought to justice?

The Solicitor General: I know that my hon. Friend has a great interest in and concern about these serious matters. I am happy to tell her that in the last year, 1,805 cases were charged by the CPS—a rise to 70.6% compared with the figure for the previous year—and 1,867 cases resulted in a conviction. The conviction rate in Derbyshire is running at 4.4% higher than the national average.

Lucy Frazer: In Cambridgeshire in 2015-16 there was an increase in the number of convictions for violence against women and girls to 1,031. What is being done to use technology to improve the gathering of evidence for these crimes?

The Solicitor General: As my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General has just mentioned, the CPS and the police are embracing the use of technology. The use of body-worn cameras, which is being rolled out across the country, will transform conviction rates and the number of guilty pleas when the evidence is clear and overwhelming in these cases.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Much of the violence against women and children is caused by human traffickers. Does the Solicitor General welcome the announcement today of an investment of £6 million by the Home Secretary in fighting modern-day slavery? We are really leading Europe on this issue.

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to link modern-day slavery with violence against women and girls. He knows from his leadership on this issue that if there is a co-ordinated approach to these problems, victims can be identified and perpetrators can be brought to justice. This is yet another welcome milestone along the road in our world leadership on these issues.

Article 50

6. **Natalie McGarry** (Glasgow East) (Ind): What the legal and administrative costs incurred by the Government were of the Supreme Court appeal on article 50. [909277]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The article 50 litigation concerned an important constitutional issue that it was right for the Supreme Court to consider. The Court considered both the Government's appeal in England and Wales proceedings and five devolution questions referred by the courts in Northern Ireland after a judgment favourable to the Government. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has committed to publishing the total cost figures in due course.

Natalie McGarry: The Secretary of State for Exiting the EU has praised the article 50 debate as among the best he has heard in the Chamber. Will the Attorney General attest whether the cost to the public purse of preventing this House from having a meaningful and democratic debate was well spent or a waste of public money?

The Attorney General: It is not a waste of public money to explore an issue of this constitutional significance in the highest court in the land, and that is what happened. Of course, if the hon. Lady were right that this was a complete waste of money, three Supreme Court Justices would not have found in favour of the Government's arguments. She will also be aware—I must gently point this out to her—that some of the money spent by the Government was spent on responding to arguments made by the Scottish Government that were rejected unanimously by the Supreme Court.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I think that just proves that you're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't with the Scottish National party. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that, ultimately, we cannot put a cost on defending democratic principles such as this?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend is right. Again, I think there is merit in ensuring that the highest court in the land has the chance to consider a very significant set of constitutional questions. It has done that and produced its judgment. The Government have complied with that judgment, and the House of Commons and the House of Lords have passed a Bill accordingly.

Criminal Corporate Liability

7. **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to reform criminal corporate liability. [909278]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The Bribery Act 2010 "failure to prevent" offence is holding corporate offenders to account for criminal activity. We are introducing a new offence of failing to prevent tax evasion in the Criminal Finances Bill. Building on this, the Government have published a call for evidence to explore the options for further reform, including extending the "failure to prevent" offence.

Sir David Amess: Will my hon. and learned Friend look very carefully at the way in which Uber operates? In the past year, it paid £411,000 in tax. I have been inundated with complaints from traditional taxi drivers about the seemingly unfair, unscrupulous and unregulated way in which Uber deploys its drivers.

The Solicitor General: I listened with concern to my hon. Friend's question. As I have said, there will be a new corporate offence of failing to prevent tax evasion. If there is evidence of criminality, I urge my hon. Friend and others to report such matters to the police.

Hare Coursing

8. **Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Director of Public Prosecutions on rates of prosecution for hare coursing. [909279]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): I have regular meetings with the Director of Public Prosecutions at which a variety of issues are discussed. The CPS takes the prosecution of hare coursing very seriously. I understand that the chief Crown prosecutor for the east midlands has recently had a meeting with the police and crime commissioner and the chief constable of Lincolnshire at which this issue was discussed.

Dr Johnson: Not only is hare coursing cruel to the hare, but it causes economic damage and is causing increasing fear in our rural communities. What is the CPS doing to ensure that prosecutions for hare coursing are successful, and to help to put a stop to this crime?

The Solicitor General: I know that my hon. Friend, who represents a rural constituency, is dealing with this issue and working with local farmers and others to try to combat it. Each Crown Prosecution Service area has a wildlife co-ordinator so that the knowledge needed to prosecute these offences is readily available. The CPS works closely with the police and other wildlife communities to tackle this serious scourge.

Imminent Threats

10. **Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): What the Government's policy is on which factors to take into account when deciding whether responding to an imminent threat is permitted under international law. [909282]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): It is the long-standing position of successive UK Governments that a state may use force in self-defence not only in response to armed attacks but to prevent an armed attack that is imminent. In each exercise of the use of force in self-defence, the UK asks itself questions such as: how certain is it that an attack will come; how soon do we believe an attack could be; what could be the scale of the attack;

could this be our last opportunity to take action; and is there anything else we could credibly do to prevent that attack?

Rehman Chishti: I thank the Attorney General for that answer. Does he agree with me that there is an important difference between the threats we face now and the threats that have not materialised but that may develop later?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and there is a significant difference between those two things. What I have sought to make clear is that the UK Government are saying they have authority under the law to respond to threats that have emerged, not to threats that may yet emerge in the future but have not yet done so.

Business of the House

10.35 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

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

MONDAY 20 MARCH—Second Reading of the Prisons and Courts Bill.

TUESDAY 21 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Intellectual Property (Unjustified Threats) Bill [*Lords*] followed by a general debate on fuel poverty.

WEDNESDAY 22 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Pension Schemes Bill [*Lords*] followed by a general debate on exiting the European Union and global trade.

THURSDAY 23 MARCH—Debate on a motion on compensation for Equitable Life policyholders followed by debate on a motion on the Social Mobility Commission state of the nation report. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 24 MARCH—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 27 March will include:

MONDAY 27 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Bus Services Bill [*Lords*].

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 27 and 30 March will be:

MONDAY 27 MARCH—Debate on an e-petition relating to badger culling.

THURSDAY 30 MARCH—Debate relating to the future of local and regional news providers.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the business for next week. Can he confirm or deny rumours that the Queen's Speech will be on 17 May?

I would like to wish everyone a very happy St Patrick's day for tomorrow. I do not know whether you know, Mr Speaker, but it traditionally marks an interruption to Lenten fasting. Perhaps the Leader of the House or even the Chief Whip will say, "Salt and vinegar crisps all round" just to cheer up the troops.

This has been a week of delay, incompetence and confusion. The big six energy companies have raised their prices and consumers have been overpaying. In response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), in which he stated that E.ON raised its prices by 14% and SSE by 8%, the Minister said:

"It has been reported by Ofgem that there is no reason to increase prices...The time is up for these companies."—[*Official Report*, 14 March 2017; Vol. 623, c. 177.]

What does the Minister do? Instead of acting, he publishes a Green Paper. The Government must take a leaf out of the 2015 Labour manifesto and step in to put a cap on prices now—no more delay. In contrast with the obsession about how someone eats a bacon sandwich, it was a popular and costed policy. May we have a debate on what powers the Government will use to protect consumers immediately?

Speaking of manifestos, it is because the Government got away with it before—they said no top-down reorganisation of the NHS but they did it; they said in

coalition no increase in tuition fees but they did it—that they thought they could do it again. There is a real piece of work to be done on national insurance contributions. Bizarrely, the Government instigated the Taylor review, which is due in June, having already put the policy through. They should have given businesses the time to plan for the increase. It is very hard for small businesses to find extra money suddenly. Instead of coming to the Chamber, the Prime Minister took to the podium in Brussels to announce that the policy had been deferred. The Chancellor came to the Chamber on Wednesday. The Chancellor seems to have fallen down his own black hole—tell that to Stephen Hawking.

What of the confusion and chaos that is Brexit? As more and more Select Committee reports are published, may we have a timetable of when and how they will be debated? The Government seem to be fixated on an unamended Bill going through Parliament, rather than preparing the country for what is to follow. The Foreign Affairs Committee report on the implications of no deal said that the Government refused to give evidence, saying it would be nothing more than an exercise in guesswork. However, the Committee's report stated:

"The consequences of such a failure are far from 'an exercise in guesswork'. They are, in scope if not in detail, largely predictable—and, in...evidence...have been predicted."

The report recommended that each Department should "produce a 'no deal' plan...setting out proposals to mitigate...risks."

Will the Leader of the House tell us whether that will happen, and whether those plans will be reported to the House? Pages 97 and 98 of the report "Brexit: trade in goods", published by the other place, remind us that

"The EU is, by a significant margin, the UK's biggest trading partner... Many UK businesses cannot easily substitute their imports from the EU with UK products."

What help will businesses be given to secure those new suppliers—or are the Government abandoning small businesses?

Let me now raise the issue of the west midlands leaflet. Apparently, a leaflet produced by another candidate for the post of west midlands mayor—a member of the same party—suggested that Siôn Simon did not have any experience. In fact, Siôn Simon is a former Member of Parliament, a former Minister and a Member of the European Parliament, so he is quite experienced enough to take the west midlands forward after Brexit.

Women are not just for International Women's Day, but for life. We are currently celebrating women's history month as we continue to tell "herstory". On 21 March, in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Room, there will be a lecture on Constance Markievicz, who was the first woman to be elected to Parliament but did not take her seat. International Anti-discrimination Day falls on the same date. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on "Race in the workplace: The McGregor-Smith Review"? Staff at the Equality and Human Rights Commission are being sacked, but it is that organisation that should be implementing the recommendations of the report, which states:

"If BME talent is fully utilised, the economy could receive a £24 billion boost."

That would fill the £2 billion hole in the Budget.

Not only is it good for the economy to use all the talents, but using all the talents is the right thing to do for the common good, in a good society.

Mr Lidington: Let me begin by joining the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) in wishing everyone, particularly our colleagues from Northern Ireland and colleagues with Irish ancestry, a happy St Patrick's day for tomorrow. It is one of those occasions which, whatever the divisions in Northern Ireland, tends to bring all sides together in a common celebration.

The hon. Lady asked whether I could confirm or deny a possible date for the Queen's Speech. I am afraid that the answer is no.

The Government have made very clear that we are pressing ahead with the Taylor review, which will be a very important study of and report on the way in which digital technology is changing our notions of employment. I am sure that Matthew Taylor will produce a number of specific and challenging recommendations, which the Government will want to take seriously.

The hon. Lady asked about exit from the EU. There is provision in our arrangements for debates on Select Committee reports, which from time to time are chosen either by the Backbench Business Committee or the Liaison Committee in the time that is allotted to them. I do not think that the hon. Lady can fault the willingness of Ministers—and, in particular, the willingness of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union—to appear before the House and before Select Committees to answer the questions that Members quite reasonably ask. Detailed work is taking place, not only in my right hon. Friend's Department but throughout Whitehall, to examine the potential impact of various possible outcomes of the negotiations on the different sectors of our economy, and it is obviously sensible for us to consult those sectors closely about possible scenarios.

I am happy to join the hon. Lady in celebrating women's history month. I hope that, as well as a celebration of the achievements of people such as Constance

Markiewicz and Nancy Astor, there will be a proper salute to the two women Prime Ministers of this country.

I completely agree with the hon. Lady about the importance of harnessing all the talent and energy of our fellow citizens from the black minority ethnic communities. While it is in part down to having the right sort of equalities and anti-discrimination legislation, I hope that the House acknowledges that getting it right also means encouraging people from those communities to believe that everything is possible for them in our country. I am heartened by having seen in the time that I have been in this place ever more men and women from our black and other minority communities playing a leading role in mainstream life in my constituency and nationally, whether in business, the media, the arts, the professions or politics at both local and national level.

I do not blame the hon. Lady for wanting to try to find something nice to say about the Labour candidate for the west midlands mayoral election, but while I am the first to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of people who serve in the European Parliament, I think that in respect of having executive authority for the midlands engine—one of the real heartlands of our national economic life—the commercial experience of Andy Street puts him head and shoulders above his competition.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Act 2017

European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017.

Business of the House

Proceedings resumed.

10.46 am

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), is unfortunately once again unable to be with us, so may I just gently remind my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House that we have an ever-growing queue of applications for debates? Would he therefore consider allowing protected time, particularly on Thursdays, for Backbench Business debates? That might mean that this House would sit slightly later, but it would also mean that we could get at least two debates in and clear the decks.

Speaking on my own behalf, the Mayor of London has not only called in, but directed approval of, a planning application in Harrow which comprises two tower blocks next door to two-storey housing. The planning committee of Harrow Council has on a cross-party basis rejected this unacceptable planning application. The Mayor of London has called it in and directed approval, against the wishes of Harrow Council, all the residents and everyone—and not only that, it is hideous. May we have a debate on planning in London?

Mr Lidington: It was good to see the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee in his place earlier this week and I hope it will not be long before he is again playing a regular part in our Thursday exchanges. In the meantime, I say to my hon. Friend that we always take seriously the Backbench Business Committee's requests for time, but the reality is that there is pressure on both Government and Backbench Business time and we must all select priorities. I am very happy to look at the case my hon. Friend and the Committee make for protected time on specific Thursdays, but I would be reluctant to agree a general rule for all Thursdays because sometimes Backbench Business debates peter out before the allotted time has been completed—that may be rare, but it does occasionally happen. I think my hon. Friend will acknowledge that we have in the past tried, where we know that there are statements coming, to protect the Backbench Business agenda.

On my hon. Friend's point about Harrow, he, as always, speaks strongly on behalf of his constituents, and I am sure he will seek to catch your eye, Mr Speaker, for a possible Adjournment debate.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): May I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week and wish everybody a happy St Patrick's day?

There is so much kicking around this morning that it is difficult to know where to start, but how about we start with securing an urgent statement on the Electoral Commission's record fine on a political party for breaching electoral law? We need to hear in that statement that this Government are taking these allegations seriously, and not hitting out petulantly, as some Members have done this morning, at the Electoral Commission and treating it with contempt. Our electoral laws are critically important to protecting our democracy, and the Conservative party will now be investigated by the Metropolitan police, just as I asked the police to do last

year. A sum of £70,000 is absolute peanuts to the Conservative party, so will the Leader of the House now say today that it will fully comply, and take part in every single one of those police investigations? This could well be the "cash for honours" of this Parliament.

May we have a debate on automotive manoeuvres? The screeching of yesterday's U-turn on national insurance contributions is still ringing in our ears, and the skid marks go all the way from here to the doors of No. 10. I do not think we have ever seen a Budget unravel as dramatically as last week's has done. Perhaps we need to get our Budgets manifesto-proofed, or perhaps we should get Laura Kuenssberg to deliver next year's Budget from the Dispatch Box.

Lastly, will there be a statement from the Government approving a section 30 order to approve a legal independence referendum if, as is likely, the Scottish Parliament votes next week to request one? Surely there can be no case for standing in the way of democracy or defying the will of the democratically elected Parliament in Scotland. I say ever so gently to the Leader of the House that if this Government are thinking for one minute of standing in the way of Scottish democracy, that would be the biggest possible recruiting sergeant for the cause of Scottish independence.

Mr Lidington: The Government will of course consider carefully any recommendations from the Electoral Commission for a change in regulatory powers. We are already considering a number of possible changes to electoral arrangements, following the report by my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles) on electoral corruption. I have to say to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), however, that complaints from his party, of all parties, about the use of battle buses are more than a little odd. It is not exactly a secret that, at the 2015 general election, the Scottish National party flew Nicola Sturgeon from constituency to constituency in support of its candidates, which suggests to me that some of his party's complaints in this respect are both spurious and hypocritical—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Leader of the House must not use that last word. He is a versatile fellow: he can use another word, and I feel sure that it will spew forth immediately.

Mr Lidington: I am happy to withdraw that, Mr Speaker. I make no allegation against any hon. Member, but I think that the party in question has not displayed consistency of approach when it comes to this matter.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about a referendum in Scotland. Obviously we will want to look at whatever request might come from the Scottish Parliament in due course when it has debated whatever motion is put before it, but I say gently to him that the autumn statement and the spring Budget together have given roughly £1.25 billion of extra spending to the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament, and that they could use that money to reduce the tax hikes on businesses and middle income families in Scotland. They could also use it to improve failing schools in Scotland, or to help struggling hospitals in Scotland. That would be a much better service to the people of Scotland than posturing about a further referendum.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Charles Walker.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Oh sorry, Mr Speaker, you took me by surprise!

Mr Speaker: As the hon. Gentleman was standing and seeking to catch my eye, his expression of incredulity is perhaps a tad misplaced.

Mr Walker: And as I am only the Chair of the Procedure Committee, these things are lost on me!

May we have an urgent debate on the conduct of the Hertfordshire local enterprise partnership in relation to its possible misuse of £6.5 million of public money to promote and ease a planning application on behalf of Veolia? The relationship between Veolia, the LEP, Hertfordshire County Council, the relevant planning authority and the owner of the Veolia contract is too close to carry the confidence of my constituents.

Mr Lidington: As always, my hon. Friend makes his point powerfully on behalf of his constituents. I note that he has been successful in securing an Adjournment debate on Thursday 23 March, so I am sure that he will pursue those arguments then.

Mr Speaker: He certainly has been.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I would like to sign my question. Is the Leader of the House aware that 18 March marks the 14th anniversary of the UK Government's recognising British sign language? Will he agree time to debate giving British sign language legal status like other recognised languages?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady has eloquently reminded us of the importance of British sign language to a number of our fellow citizens who live with deafness or a severe hearing impairment. The Department for Work and Pensions has under way a review of the provision of signing services in this country and has received several hundred submissions. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will bring forward the conclusions in due course. I can also tell the House that the Department for Education plans to accept British sign language as an alternative qualification to functional skills in English within apprenticeships, which I hope will be one step towards giving opportunities to more people who live with deafness to play a full part in the labour market.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate aimed at promoting projects to deter young people from drinking to excess and taking drugs? I recently saw the Smashed Project perform at St Thomas More High School, and I am convinced that a hard-hitting message can make a real impact.

Mr Lidington: I share my hon. Friend's concern about the devastating impact that drug and alcohol misuse can have on the lives of too many young people and their families, who are often distraught about what has happened to a loved son or daughter. The Government take a broad approach to prevention, supporting investment in a range of different programmes. We announced

earlier this week new funding for Mentor UK to continue to deliver the ADEPIS programme, which includes a range of resources to give young people the tools and confidence they need to resist being drawn towards drug misuse in the first place.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): When can we debate early-day motion 1079, which covers the House's abject failure to deal with the potentially corrupt revolving door between ministerial office and outside jobs?

[That this House recalls former Prime Minister David Cameron's condemnation in 2010 of politicians who are out to serve themselves and not the country by lobbying; notes the abject failure of the Government's watchdog, the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, to reduce the abuses of the potentially corrupting revolving door between ministerial office and big business lobbying; and calls on the Government to establish an effective watchdog that would enhance the House's reputation for probity, removing the opportunities for former Ministers to sell their inside knowledge and contacts for financial advantage by prohibiting their lobbying for companies they influenced or regulated in their Ministerial roles.]

The temptation is there for former Ministers to use their insider knowledge and contacts for their private gain. How is it right that the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, which is responsible for approving such appointments, saw fit to give its blessing to a former Minister receiving £13,000 a day in addition to his parliamentary salary? Does that not bring this House into deeper disrepute?

Mr Lidington: It is right that we have a committee that is not part of the Government and not a Committee of this House or the other place to make rulings on individual cases. It is important that former Ministers stick to the proper procedures in seeking clearance before taking on any new external appointment.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Now that the Government have expressed their determination to honour both the letter and the spirit of manifesto commitments, may we have an urgent debate on how the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government can be persuaded to honour the letter and the spirit of the Government's commitment to Parliament and to my constituents on 7 December 2015, as reported in column 822 of *Hansard*, that they would not force structural change on any local authority against its will?

Mr Lidington: As he has done previously, my hon. Friend speaks strongly about the continued existence of Christchurch Borough Council. He will continue to press the matter strongly with Ministers, and I am sure that his opportunity will arise in an Adjournment debate at some point.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Following a High Court judgment, the Government have to produce a new air quality plan by next month. Fifty thousand people a year die as a result of air pollution, which has an impact on my congested city of York. Even in Micklegate ward, we have five poor air quality hotspots. May we have debate in Government time about the steps that are needed ahead of the publication of the air quality plan so that we can have a real input into the Government's plans?

Mr Lidington: The Government have given that very clear undertaking. There was a plan in place that the courts deemed to be inadequate, and the Government will respond to that court judgment by July. The right occasion for Parliament to consider the issue in greater detail will be when the plan is available.

Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): As the economy continues to thrive, the claimant rate in my constituency is just 1.9%, but the local economy is quite dependent on European workers. Can we have a debate in Government time on how we can have a sensible work permit system for those valuable workers post-Brexit?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes an important point and reminds us that, when debating immigration policy, we should not get trapped into criticising people who come here from European countries and elsewhere to play an important part in our economy by working hard, paying taxes and contributing to our society. As he knows, the Government are committed to trying to agree a reciprocal deal on the status of EU nationals here and British nationals in the 27 other EU countries at the earliest possible stage of the negotiations. Although we will need a system of immigration controls subsequent to our exit from the European Union, we are alive to the need to be sensitive to British industry's continuing need to staff posts.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Last week the Leader of the House assured me that the Government are seeking urgent clarification from the Israeli authorities on the new law banning foreigners who call for the boycotting of illegal Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. There has been a week of absolute silence from the Foreign Office on that issue and, on Monday, Hugh Lanning, chair of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, was the first UK citizen to be deported from Israel following the passing of that law. May we please have a statement from the Foreign Office clarifying how the application of the law will affect UK passport holders and UK foreign policy?

Mr Lidington: The straight answer is that, since the hon. Lady raised the issue with me last week, we have not yet had the detailed clarification that we are seeking from the Israeli Government. As a result, the permanent secretary at the Foreign Office is raising the matter directly with Israeli officials this week.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am grateful for the fact that you have called me before calling any Liberal Democrat Member, Mr Speaker. This week unemployment, at 4.7%, was at its lowest rate since the summer of 1975. It has always been a rule of thumb that Labour Governments increase unemployment and Conservative Governments reduce it, but there is another link—[*Interruption.*] I apologise to Labour Members, but the link is clearly different. What happened in the summer of '75? That was when the country decided to stay in the European Economic Community, so unemployment has gone up all the time we have been in, and now we are coming out, it is going down. May we have a debate on that?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has already had the debate.

Mr Lidington: The growth in employment and the fall in unemployment should be welcomed unreservedly on both sides of the House, and it is due to the hard work and enterprise of British business in creating jobs and to the Government's creating an economic climate in which businesses want to invest and are willing to hire people. I hope that every Member, whichever party they come from, will welcome the fact that unemployment is now at its lowest since 1975 and that employment is at its highest in our country's history.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): As the Leader of the House knows, next week marks the second anniversary of the conflict in Yemen that has resulted in the death of 10,000 Yemeni people and brought that country to the brink of famine. The Yemeni people now face the four horsemen of the apocalypse: al-Qaeda, Daesh, starvation and airstrikes. When can we have a debate on that important subject? Britain holds the pen on Yemen so far as that matter is concerned, and it is vital that the House is updated before Yemen slides into the greatest catastrophe of this century.

Mr Lidington: We all share the right hon. Gentleman's sense of horror at what has happened in Yemen. The British Government are extremely active in the international work, but it would be foolish to pretend that we have a quick and easy solution to this conflict. We continue to support the tireless efforts of the UN special envoy to broker an agreement between the warring parties inside Yemen, just as we continue to commit large sums of our overseas aid budget to relieve humanitarian suffering in Yemen. That political work and that humanitarian work will continue.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): In the unlikely event of the Scottish people following the advice of the Scottish National party and voting for independence, they would be very much poorer. Many of my constituents are already concerned about the foreign aid budget. May we have a debate on the aid budget, so that the Government could make it clear that they will not sanction an increase in order to bail out the Scots?

Mr Lidington: There is some really good news for Scotland: since 2010 employment in Scotland has gone up by 171,000; 90,000 fewer Scots are out of work, and women's employment in Scotland has gone up by 76,000. We should celebrate that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House might know that people in Huddersfield are deeply disappointed in a Budget that does so little for the NHS and for our hospital accident and emergency unit, which might be closed. But they are good people in Huddersfield, so they wanted me to prioritise today in this House the need to do something to save the children starving in east Africa. We must have a debate on that, raise consciousness about it and get this country to donate to save those children and families from starvation.

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about the need to remember that humanitarian crisis in east Africa. The Department for International Development is extremely focused on that, but anything that can be done to raise public consciousness about the need for charitable donations to supplement the Government's work is very welcome.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Last Friday, I visited Great Addington Church of England Primary School, where I was asked lots of difficult questions, inspired by the pupils' visit to Parliament last year. They asked me to convey to the House their sincere appreciation for the excellent tour, and I ask the Leader of the House to join me in thanking the staff of the House for their help on that. May we have a debate next week about the important role that this place plays in educating young people about our democracy?

Mr Lidington: I am delighted that the pupils from Great Addington's school enjoyed their visit. Obviously, they put their lessons to good use in interrogating my hon. Friend. That will prepare him for his future ministerial career, I am certain. I know that you have given very high priority to enhancing the House's educational work, Mr Speaker. I certainly share that objective and am seeking to do this in programming my future external engagement. I hope that we all in our individual constituencies will try to interest young men and women in our work, because capturing the imagination of boys and girls at a young age is the surest way in which we can rebuild confidence in and enthusiasm for our democratic processes.

Mr Speaker: The answer from the Leader of the House is of great interest to me and to colleagues, but it may also be of considerable interest to a number of young people who are observing our proceedings from not very far away, at whom the Leader of the House, to his credit, is now smiling beatifically.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Race hate crime in the north-east is up by 48% since Brexit, and the English Defence League is to march again in South Shields this weekend. My constituents and I have always challenged extremism, and such groups are not welcome in South Shields, yet the process to have such marches banned is complex and arduous. Will the Government make a statement on what they are doing to stem the rise of racially charged demonstrations, which have no place in Britain?

Mr Lidington: I face the challenge of EDL marches in my constituency. A balance has to be struck between the rights of freedom of expression and freedom to demonstrate, which we all cherish in the United Kingdom—and they cannot be only for the people with whom we agree—and the importance of demonstrating our rejection of extremist groups. My view is that the best way to respond to the EDL or similar groups is for the entire community to speak and to show in their actions that they utterly reject and are repelled by the venom and hatred that those groups seek to sow in our society. In particular, those of us in leadership positions should show solidarity with the minority groups who feel so threatened.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): There are housing association tenants in my Bury constituency who would like the opportunity to buy their property. May we please have a statement on the progress on extending the right to buy to housing association tenants?

Mr Lidington: In last year's autumn statement, the Chancellor announced a large-scale regional pilot that will enable more than 3,000 housing association tenants

to buy their own home. We are undertaking pilots to ensure that we get the policy right. We will test its key features and look at the evidence to decide how we can take forward the scheme.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union admitted that the Government have made no full assessment of the potential impact on the UK economy of our leaving the EU without a deal. May we have a debate in Government time on that specific issue so that the House can hold the Government to account on that very important matter?

Mr Lidington: There will be an opportunity in the debate on EU exit and international trade that I announced in the business statement. I should correct the hon. Lady, though: my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said yesterday that the Government are looking across the piece at the impact of our leaving the EU on various sectors of the economy. He was asked about a new overall economic assessment, and said that his Department, and others in Whitehall, are in the process of carrying out a programme of rigorous and extensive analytical work on a sector-by-sector basis. That, surely, is the constructive way to approach the matter.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): We all know that the Government are very keen on manifesto commitments and following through on them. I think all parties would welcome a debate on what the Government mean by "shortly". Before Christmas, we had a debate on elephants and the ivory trade, and were told then that a decision would come out shortly. In February, we were told again that it was coming out shortly. May we have a statement on when we will know when we are going to follow through on the Conservative manifesto promise to ban the trade in ivory?

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs plans to take the decision and announce her proposed way forward soon.

Mr Speaker: If we could try to speed up, that would be really good, because there is a statement to follow.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House will no doubt be aware that at the recent Beacon awards, which are known as the Oscars of the further education sector, Bridgend College, which sits in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), won an award. Will he find some time for a debate on the success of the FE sector, particularly its contribution to enabling people of any age to continue on their learning path?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman is right to remind us of the importance of that sector, and I join him in congratulating Bridgend College on its achievement.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Medway hospital in my constituency has been in special measures for nearly four years. The staff and the leadership in partnership with the Government have worked tirelessly to improve standards. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to the excellent staff who have won

awards for their work, including Excellence in Maternity Care? May we have an urgent statement on the performance of hospitals in special measures?

Mr Lidington: It is always tough when staff have to face up to criticisms of their record and to see their institution placed in special measures. I am delighted to hear from my hon. Friend that staff at Medway hospital have responded so positively, and I hope that their efforts soon receive the public tributes that I know that he hopes for.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Yet another GP surgery is closing in my constituency—the sixth in recent times. The patients are being dispersed to other surgeries, but the length of time that people have to wait for a GP appointment is growing. Can we have a statement from the Minister about the performance of NHS England in providing GP services, because the situation in my constituency is intolerable?

Mr Lidington: We want to see GP practices open for longer so that more people can benefit from the excellent services they offer. Some 17 million patients have already benefited from evening and weekend appointments. We have increased investment in general practice by nearly £2.5 billion, and there are 1,100 more GPs now compared with 2010. I will certainly draw to the Secretary of State's attention the particular difficulty in the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): May we have a debate on the northern powerhouse schools strategy? Last month saw the launch of the Pendle challenge, with more than 80 organisations involved in the provision of education from nought to 18 years coming together to improve the aspirations and achievements of young people in Pendle. I am keen to see how we can better work together across the north on this issue.

Mr Lidington: As my hon. Friend says, it is really important that we look to raise not just the standards of achievement by children in schools, but their aspirations and their expectations about what is possible in their lives. The northern powerhouse schools strategy aims to do just that, which is why the Government are putting in £70 million over the course of this Parliament. I hope that we will see a further announcement on that before very long.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Given that, shamefully, there was no mention of help for the WASPI women in the Budget, can we have another opportunity to speak on behalf of the women affected, including my constituent who was denied, with little notice, the chance to retire when she had planned and has now found out that she is terminally ill, as her voice and others deserve to be heard?

Mr Lidington: I point the hon. Lady towards questions to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on Monday 27 March. There has been about £1 billion of investment in transitional arrangements to help those women who are worst affected by the equalisation of pension age. None the less, the equalisation of pension age did have cross-party support in this House when it was brought in.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Millions of people have installed cavity wall insulation successfully, but many have experienced failures, leading to damp, fungal infection and structural difficulties in their homes. Those people are often elderly and disabled, and they thought that they were participating in a Government scheme. The industry's response has been defensive and evasive most of the time, and the Government seem to be hoping to keep out of what could be a very expensive mess. Can we have an early debate on the CWI scandal?

Mr Lidington: Without checking, I do not know to what extent this is a legislative and regulatory problem and to what extent it is a matter of consumer law to be resolved in the normal way. If the hon. Gentleman wants to write to me with details about his experience, I will happily consider the case.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I am sure that I am not the only Member of this House to be disappointed that the Chancellor made no mention of extra police funding in his Budget statement last week. Cuts to frontline policing in Bradford South have been profound, with 75 fewer officers engaged in neighbourhood policing today than in 2012. Will the Leader of the House allocate time for a debate on this important issue?

Mr Lidington: The spending total for the police, as for every other Government service, was announced at the time of the spending review. Crimes traditionally measured by the independent Crime Survey for England and Wales have actually fallen by a third since 2010; they are now at a record low. That shows that the police have been extremely professional in managing their budgets to ensure that the public are protected and that crime comes down.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): May we have a debate or a statement on funding third sector organisations to assist the long-term unemployed into work? I refer the Leader of the House to early-day motion 1003, which seeks to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the GalGael Trust, an organisation in my constituency that maintains the skills and traditions of woodwork and metalwork.

[That this House recognises the 20th Anniversary of the founding of an inspiring and life-changing community project based in Govan, the GalGael Trust, founded by the late Colin McLeod whose vision for the project is still upheld today; notes that this groundbreaking boat-building and woodcraft workshop upholds the proud Glaswegian traditions of hard work, community spirit and skilled craftwork whilst changing lives by restoring pride through achievement and developing skills; further notes that GalGael shows that supporting the long-term unemployed with respect and a creative vision can be more effective and engaging than traditional methods; notes that re-using Scottish timber from landfill respects the environment and the roots of the project lie in that vision of positive action coming from protest; and supports the view that the sustainability of this project is due to the inspiring people who have been at the heart of the community in Govan, working to maintain the skills and traditions of crafts in woodwork and metalwork, and building a future whilst honouring the past.]

[Chris Stephens]

Does the Leader of the House agree that the sustainability and finance of such organisations can help the long-term unemployed?

Mr Lidington: I do not know any more about the GalGael Trust than what the hon. Gentleman just told the House. I am happy to salute the work that it does and the work of many other such organisations in all parts of the United Kingdom in trying to provide mentoring and support, which is often so valuable to people who have been unemployed for a very long time in helping them have the confidence and basic skills to get back into the marketplace.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Yesterday, there were three separate illegal Traveller encampments across my constituency. This problem plagued my constituents for most of last year and is taking up where it left off. I recognise that Travellers have rights—as do my constituents, especially to enjoy the public parks that they pay for. This issue does not just affect my constituency; it is a problem right across the country, and there is real confusion about the law and enforcement. May we have a debate in Government time where Ministers set out clearly the Government's expectations about how the problem of illegal encampments should be tackled?

Mr Lidington: This might be good material for a Backbench Business debate, as it does indeed affect a large number of constituencies. Sanctions and processes are available to both local authorities and the police to deal with the problem of illegal encampments. I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I think what riles residents more than anything else is the sense that they are expected to stick by the rules and obey the law when it comes to any kind of planning matter, yet they see people getting away with it apparently scot-free, which they quite rightly get angry about.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): A constituent recently came to see me about his zero-hours employment with the leading automotive retailer Evans Halshaw, where he has worked for six years with no sick pay and no job security. May we have a debate on how we can strengthen the legislation in relation to this kind of insecure employment?

Mr Lidington: Of course, it was a Conservative-led Government that outlawed exclusivity clauses in zero-hours contracts. Although we keep a close watch on this—I am sure it is one of things that Matthew Taylor's review will want to look at—it remains the case that fewer than 3% of the workforce see a zero-hours contract as their main job, and roughly 70% of those people say that they are happy with the number of hours that they work.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The Leader of the House is of course no philistine, so he will know that this year is the bicentenary of the birth of the eminent Scottish architect Alexander "Greek" Thomson. Will he join me in congratulating the Alexander Thomson Society on putting together a whole year of

events to remember the architect's work, and may we have a debate on his contribution to Scottish-built heritage?

Mr Speaker: This is the question that the hon. Gentleman would have asked if he had been present for his question at Department for Culture, Media and Sport questions. He was not, so he did not, and he is therefore doing it now. I just thought I would make that by way of a public information statement.

Mr Lidington: I am happy to pay tribute to the work of the Alexander Thomson Society. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will pen a brief note to all Members so that we know where we can go to see more of Thomson's work when we come to Scotland.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): In recent weeks, there have been a number of reports of foxes being hunted by hounds in Cheshire. Graphic and disturbing images have been plastered all over the internet. This barbaric practice is illegal, and I thought this Government were keen to implement the will of the people. May we please have a debate on what more can be done to uphold the law?

Mr Lidington: The enforcement of the law is, rightly, a matter not for Ministers but for independent police and prosecuting authorities.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Prime Minister said in this House on Tuesday that at the recent European Council meeting she encouraged the EU to

"complete the single market and the digital single market."—[*Official Report*, 14 March 2017; Vol. 623, c. 180.]

May we have a statement or a debate in this House on why it is in the UK's national interest for the EU to complete those markets but it is not in the UK's national interest to be part of them?

Mr Lidington: It is in the UK's national interest that the European Union, with which we are negotiating a new partnership, has a system of economic co-operation that is as friendly to open markets and free trade as possible, because that will enhance the opportunities for our companies and citizens when it comes to that new relationship. I would have thought that was an objective that the hon. Gentleman would support.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): May we have a statement on car manufacturers who cheat on emissions tests? Volkswagen, and now it seems Renault, have serious questions to answer. If there is fraudulent behaviour, senior executives need to be held to account.

Mr Lidington: I have seen the reports of alleged malpractice by Renault. I would hope that any such allegations were properly investigated, and that those responsible for any wrongdoing were held properly to account.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Chester continues to be blighted by student housing developments built by speculative developers. Those developments are favoured because the distortion in the council tax rules mean that they get higher investment, and they take up

land that should be used for family accommodation. May I add my voice to that of the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) in calling for a debate on planning law, so that we can tackle these issues?

Mr Lidington: With the best will in the world, I suspect that we will never get a system of planning law that satisfies everybody in every sector of the economy, but I encourage the hon. Gentleman, as I encouraged my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), to seek an Adjournment debate or Back-Bench business debate on this matter.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): Today is the 708th anniversary of Robert the Bruce calling his first Parliament in St Andrews. Of course, he spent a bit of time in my constituency, too. Can we have a debate on Scotland's distinct parliamentary tradition, given that it is a story that is still being written?

Mr Lidington: That might be a suitable subject for a Scottish National party Supply day debate. Convinced Unionist though I am, I am happy to salute Scotland's parliamentary and constitutional tradition. I see the declaration of Arbroath and the Scottish parliamentary tradition as being among those constitutional and ultimately democratic traditions in our national life that have helped to enrich the United Kingdom as a whole.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): You may be aware, Mr Speaker, that I have campaigned on periods and have, within that, looked at period poverty. I recently spoke to BBC Radio Leeds, which highlighted that in that city, a significant number of girls are playing truant because they do not have any sanitary protection around the time of their period. One can only imagine the indignity that that causes. May we have a debate in Government time on whether there is anything that we can do to provide sanitary protection for low-income families and those who simply cannot afford it in these days of austerity?

Mr Lidington: This is probably a matter to be raised initially in an Adjournment debate, but of course one of the things that we will be able to deal with when we have left the European Union is the rates of value added tax that are obligatory under the fifth directive. The hon. Lady knows that the tax on sanitary products is one of the matters that the Government are committed to re-examining.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Recently, I asked the Prime Minister whether she would at the very least exempt older people from the local housing allowance cap that is being introduced for social housing tenants in 2019. Unfortunately, she did not seem to understand the question, so to assist her—and, more importantly, to avoid causing undue hardship to thousands of people across the country—may we have a debate on the implications of the proposals as soon as possible?

Mr Lidington: I am happy to refer the matter to the Department for Work and Pensions so that it can look at the problem, if the hon. Gentleman would like to let me have a few details, but the principle of a cap is right. Funds are available to councils for discretionary use in

cases of hardship, as he knows. If he thinks that there is a particular case for reform to the regulations, he can write to me and I will pass that to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): May we have a statement on the lack of Changing Places toilets across the UK? It cannot be right that parents of disabled children are having to change their children on unhygienic toilet floors in this day and age. Surely this must be put on a statutory footing. Something must be done to bring us into the century that we should be in.

Mr Lidington: That is an interesting point. I absolutely understand the difficult position for parents who find themselves in such a situation. The hon. Lady might want to raise the matter in an Adjournment debate. I also suggest that she writes directly to the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work; I am sure that she will get a very reasonable hearing.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I had a Westminster Hall debate yesterday, which a number of families travelled from across the UK to attend. The debate was also attended by six MPs from majority parties throughout the House. We were debating police widows' pensions, as the widows lose their pensions should they remarry or cohabit. It is basically a tax on love. Unfortunately, the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service gave only a seven-minute response—including taking an intervention—in the 15 minutes that he had in which to speak. Can we now have a debate here in the main Chamber so that a further and fuller answer is provided to those families, who feel they are facing a terrible injustice?

Mr Lidington: I am sure that the hon. Lady would acknowledge that the Minister, since he speaks last in such debates, only has such time as is available from the 90 minutes or 60 minutes that has been allotted for that particular debate. I am sure that she will be able to air her concerns further if she seeks the opportunity to raise this matter at Home Office questions, via the Backbench Business Committee or in an Adjournment debate.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to get back to my usual place in business questions—at the end.

I am not sure whether the Leader of the House is aware of the Daughters of the Vote event that was held at the Canadian Parliament on International Women's Day. Young women from each of Canada's 338 constituencies or ridings sat in Parliament to gain experience and communicate their vision for Canada, hopefully inspiring them to participate in the political process for years to come. Can we have a debate in this place on how we can encourage more women into politics?

Mr Lidington *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Before the Leader of the House replies, I say to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) that he can always tell himself and the people of his constituency that we keep the best till last.

Mr Lidington: The way in which some of today's exchanges have highlighted the need to engage better with young people as an institution, and the way in which we have addressed, through these exchanges, the need to encourage greater opportunities for women, help to contribute to the hon. Gentleman's objective. I hope that he would agree that it is not just about women. We also want to encourage young men, particularly those from working-class backgrounds, who often feel disaffected and alienated from mainstream democratic processes, and people from black and minority ethnic communities to be involved more. We can all do this through leadership in our constituencies and by using the services of the parliamentary education service, which really does provide first-class education materials and will happily host visits from schools and colleges here.

Sky/21st Century Fox: Merger

11.33 am

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): I came to the House on 6 March to give an update on the proposed merger between 21st Century Fox and Sky. At that time, I said that I was minded to issue a European intervention notice on the basis that I believed there to be public interest considerations, as set out in the Enterprise Act 2002, that may be relevant to this proposed merger and warrant further investigation.

The grounds on which I was minded to intervene were, as I explained at that time, media plurality and commitment to broadcasting standards, but I also confirmed that, in line with statutory guidance, I would be inviting further representations in writing from the parties. I gave them until last Wednesday to provide those representations.

Having carefully considered the representations from the parties and the other representations that I have received, I can now tell the House that I have today issued a European intervention notice on the grounds of media plurality and commitment to broadcasting standards. I have written to the parties, Ofcom, and the Competition and Markets Authority to inform them of my decision.

While the representations from 21st Century Fox highlighted areas in which it contested the position taken in my "minded to" letter, none of the representations have led me to dismiss the concerns I have regarding the two public interest grounds I previously specified. I am of the view that it remains both important, given the issues raised, and wholly appropriate for me to seek comprehensive advice from Ofcom on those public interest considerations, and from the CMA on jurisdiction issues. I note that, overall, the parties have welcomed a thorough regulatory review, and that is what will now happen as a result of the intervention notice I have issued.

Since my "minded to" decision, I have also received just over 700 representations from third parties, the vast majority of which supported intervention. A number of those representations called for me to create a new public interest consideration, which would require a fit and proper assessment of the parties to the merger to take place as part of the intervention process. They also argued that it should be made clearer that matters of corporate governance, accountability and conduct could be taken into account in assessing this merger. These issues relate to questions about the application of the fit and proper test by Ofcom, and I will come to those issues shortly.

As I have previously set out, the decision will now trigger action by Ofcom to assess and report to me on the public interest grounds I have specified, and by the CMA to report to me on jurisdiction. They each have 40 working days to prepare and provide these reports. This means that I will expect their reports by Tuesday 16 May. I will then resume my decision-making role in relation to the merger.

To be clear, this intervening period, and indeed any time after that until a final decision on the merger is taken, is subject to the constraints that apply to my quasi-judicial role. Mr Speaker, I am sure you understand

that I cannot—nor can any other member of the Government—comment substantively on the case as it proceeds. I will, however, as I have done so far, keep the House updated once I have considered the reports of Ofcom and the CMA.

What I will comment on is that much of the discussion in last week's proceedings here and in the other place focused on Ofcom's assessment of whether a licensee is fit and proper, including the ongoing duty that falls to Ofcom under the 1990 and 1996 Broadcasting Acts. I have received representations from the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) and the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), as well as from a number of other parties, on adding fit and proper as a new public interest consideration in the Enterprise Act 2002. I want to assure them that I have very carefully considered the arguments they have put forward.

The grounds set out in the Enterprise Act that allow for intervention in media mergers are aimed at ensuring plurality of the media, which is essential to a healthy democracy—something I know that Members of this House and the other place support. It is a view I fully and unequivocally endorse. However, I am also clear that the question of whether someone is fit and proper to hold a broadcasting licence is a different requirement, and one that, quite rightly, sits with Ofcom, the independent regulator.

On Monday, Ofcom announced that it would conduct its fit and proper assessment at the same time it considers any public interest test in response to my decision to intervene in the merger. This means that Ofcom will conduct its assessment within the 40 working days it has to report to me on the public interests I have specified in the intervention notice. I welcome Ofcom's announcement, which will provide not only clarity for the parties, but reassurance to those who have expressed their own concerns, that this is a matter that Ofcom will now consider before the merger takes place.

I trust, as before, that this update is helpful to right hon. and hon. Members, and that it gives us an opportunity to debate this important issue, while at the same time respecting the limits of what I can say, as I referred to earlier, given my ongoing quasi-judicial role in relation to this merger. I commend the statement to the House.

11.38 am

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance notice of her statement. She says that she will go ahead with what she indicated she was going to do last week. That might not sound like a big deal, but it is more than the Chancellor and the Prime Minister managed yesterday.

Labour Members welcome the fact that the Secretary of State is intervening. She will have noticed that 21st Century Fox is happy, too. In a letter to her last week, it said:

“We welcome a thorough and thoughtful review”.

I have no doubt that that welcome is sincere, and that 21st Century Fox is thrilled by her decision. On that basis, I hope that it will seek not to challenge or impede any element of Ofcom's investigation. If it does, I trust that she will make a new referral to put it beyond doubt that Ofcom can investigate what it needs to investigate.

Can the Secretary of State confirm that the “broadcasting standards” ground of her referral gives Ofcom the power to investigate any corporate governance issues affecting 21st Century Fox, including the phone hacking scandal, any cover-up of illegality at News International, the rehiring of people responsible for governance failures, and ongoing sexual harassment claims in the United States? Is it her view that Ofcom should examine those issues?

The Secretary of State referred to representations made by me, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) and others about adding “fit and proper” as a new public interest consideration, but she has regrettably chosen to reject them. I welcome Ofcom's announcement that it will conduct a fit and proper assessment at the same time as considering the public interest test she has specified today, but I have two concerns about this. First, Ofcom has only 40 days to conduct the fit and proper assessment. Is the Secretary of State confident that it can get to the bottom of all these issues in such a short time? Secondly, the 2012 Ofcom report on James Murdoch, which found that his conduct

“repeatedly fell short of the conduct to be expected of him as a chief executive officer and chairman”,

contained this important caveat:

“The evidence available to date does not provide a reasonable basis to find that”

he

“knew of widespread wrongdoing or criminality at”

News of the World. The reason for that lack of evidence was that Ofcom did not have the power to gather the evidence it needed.

Just a few years ago, News Corporation, 21st Century Fox's predecessor company, was involved in one of the biggest corporate scandals and one of the biggest corporate governance failures of modern times. Many of the questions about the failure of corporate governance failure within 21st Century Fox's predecessor company, and much of the evidence of the role of James Murdoch within those failures, can be answered only by going ahead with part 2 of the Leveson inquiry. Ofcom does not have the power to obtain documents and compel witnesses to appear before it. Is not the easiest way of getting to the bottom of the corporate governance questions that we all want answered to hold an inquiry in public, using powers under the Inquiries Act 2005, with terms of reference that have already been announced by a Conservative Prime Minister as a promise to the victims of phone hacking—namely Leveson part 2?

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I will address his final point first—the issue of Leveson—as I did last time I was at the Dispatch Box on this matter. As he will know, the consultation we launched, which closed in January, is subject to judicial review. I am therefore unable to comment on the consultation, or any aspects of it, with regard to the Leveson inquiry. I hope he will understand that I cannot make further comment about that.

I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman welcomes the decision to refer this merger, but it is important that I make a couple of points in relation to his questions. He asked whether the “broadcasting standards” element could include looking at corporate governance. I was

[Karen Bradley]

clear in my original “minded to” letter and in the statement I made to the House on 6 March that corporate governance was one of the issues on which I was referring the matter to Ofcom, and therefore I would expect it to look at that. Clearly, however, Ofcom is an independent regulator. I have made the decision to refer to Ofcom, but it is for Ofcom to decide what evidence it wants to look at. It is open to look at whatever evidence it feels is appropriate to enable it to make its decision.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the fit and proper test. I very carefully considered the representations that were made, but it is important that it is the independent regulator that looks at fit and proper and the Government who have grounds on which to intervene under the Enterprise Act. Those two things have to be kept separate. The Government should not step into the area where, quite rightly, the regulator should sit.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether Ofcom has the time, resources and ability to gather the evidence that it needs. I have been assured by Ofcom that it has the time to do this and the ability to gather the evidence it needs, and I now look forward to letting it get on with the job.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Although it is clearly sensible to ask the regulator to examine this bid, does my right hon. Friend recognise that this transaction represents a £11.7 billion investment by an international company in a British broadcaster and is, as such, a fantastic vote of confidence in the UK’s remaining an international centre of broadcasting long after we leave the European Union?

Karen Bradley: As the House knows, my right hon. Friend has significant experience in matters of culture, media and sport. He is right to say that the UK is global Britain, open for business to the whole world, and that it will remain so after we have left the European Union.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. I am pleased that she will intervene in the proposed merger of Sky and Fox, and that she will ask Ofcom to investigate the deal. Scottish National party Members have consistently voiced our support for media plurality and our commitment to broadcasting standards. There are valid concerns about the merger, which will increase the influence of Rupert Murdoch and his family in the UK’s media. There are concerns regarding a number of breaches of broadcasting standards by Fox, as well as News Corporation’s past behaviour and corporate governance failures.

Many people highlight the fact that part 2 of the Leveson inquiry has yet to be commenced, and they question whether such a significant deal can go ahead before that happens. This is not the first time that there has been an attempt to take over Sky, and we should be mindful of why the previous bid courted such controversy and failed.

At the same time, it should be acknowledged that television is adapting to changes in viewing habits and competition throughout the world. Some will argue that investment in Sky might allow the UK to thrive in the international arena and continue to compete with competitors such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. We

welcome the fact that Ofcom will report on the public interest grounds of media plurality and commitment to broadcasting standards, as well as conducting a fit and proper assessment. I trust and believe that that will provide the Secretary of State with the necessary recommendations on how to proceed, and I look forward to Ofcom’s conclusions.

Karen Bradley: I refer to my earlier comments regarding the Leveson inquiry—I hope that the hon. Gentleman will understand. I thank him for his welcome for the decision. I look forward, as he does, to seeing the reports from Ofcom and the Competition and Markets Authority, which will enable me to use my quasi-judicial role to make a fair and transparent decision.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): It appears that even the mention of the name Murdoch gets some people twitching and frothing at the mouth. Does the Secretary of State recognise the fact that while James Murdoch was chief executive and later chairman of Sky, the company grew to employ 24,000 people in this country, with investments of £700 million a year in original production and programming? Does she believe, as I do, that Sky is an important part of the creativity of this country, and that the proposal of this merger shows the confidence of the rest of the world in Britain’s productivity and future?

Karen Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I agree that media plurality is important, which is why I have asked Ofcom to look at the proposed merger and to make a decision, on the grounds set out in the Enterprise Act 2002, about whether it will affect media plurality. Like him, I am optimistic that, following Brexit, the UK broadcasting industry will continue to thrive and to be the world-leading industry that it is today.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s decision to refer this bid. Many of us believe that in view of the conduct of the Murdochs and the untrammelled power that they already have, it is not in the public interest for them to take over Sky and have full control.

I want to ask about the question of fitness, which I know the Secretary of State has thought about a lot. The 2011 Ofcom review took 15 months to look at the fitness of the Murdochs, but she expects Ofcom to report back to her within 40 days. There is a question about timescale and powers, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) has said. Can she assure us that if during this period Ofcom seeks more time, or indeed more powers, to carry out the fitness review, she will grant its request?

Karen Bradley: Ofcom has assured me that it has the time and the powers that it needs, and I look forward to seeing its report in due course.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the freedom of the press, and indeed of press ownership, is a bastion of our liberties? It is for Ofcom—objectively, not subjectively—to define, as a narrow term of art, a fit and proper person; it is not for Ministers and politicians to get involved in this.

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend's point is exactly what I concluded, having considered the representations. There needs to be a distinction between the work of the independent regulator in determining who is a fit and proper person to hold a broadcasting licence versus the role of the Secretary of State when it comes to determining whether a media merger can go ahead under the terms of the Enterprise Act.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Having encouraged the Secretary of State to take this course of action, may I now welcome the fact that she has done so? She deserves credit for doing the right thing, and I have no doubt that she will have the support of the House as this matter goes forward. Many years ago, I served on the Standing Committee that considered the Enterprise Bill, and I recall that the provisions on this process were supported by all parties at that time. It strikes me, however, that in the light of this experience, it might be appropriate at its conclusion to revisit whether we do in fact have the processes we really need to ensure that we get the ends that we want to achieve.

Karen Bradley: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for welcoming this. If he wants to make representations to me regarding the Enterprise Act and areas in which he feels changes could be made in the light of changing broadcasting and consuming habits, I will of course look at them carefully.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I agree with the Secretary of State's view that the decision on whether somebody is a fit and proper person should quite correctly be for an independent regulator, not a politician. Does she believe that that is consistent with our goals of not politicising our broadcasting landscape?

Karen Bradley: I agree with my hon. Friend. That was exactly the conclusion I reached when looking at the representations that I received.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): I recognise and respect what the Secretary of State has told the House, and we all appreciate her keeping the House up to date. I again say that this is not a question of any kind of vendetta against Mr Murdoch, but it would be simply unacceptable for the amount of media ownership he already controls to be increased. That is the position, and it is why I hope that the right decision will be taken at the end of the day.

Karen Bradley: Ofcom will look at these matters and I look forward to seeing its report.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, but will she assure me that the question of plurality is not just examined occasionally—when a big merger such as this comes up—but kept constantly under review by Ofcom and, indeed, her Department?

Karen Bradley: Ofcom has a responsibility to consider on a regular basis the fit and proper person test for holding a broadcasting licence. Clearly, however, when looking at the whole media landscape—there were questions about the status of Channel 4 during oral questions—the

issue of media plurality is at the forefront of my mind. That is the case when looking at the right decision to take regarding the future of Channel 4 and all media matters.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for her statement. I have received a huge number of emails on this issue from many constituents, and I welcome the intervention that she detailed in her statement. A free, open and diverse press is of course important to democracy, and I want to put on record that my constituents have asked that she understands the depth and strength of feeling on this issue. I look forward to hearing from her further in due course.

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady will probably not be surprised to hear that I have, I suspect, received more emails than even she has on this matter. I have taken note of them.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I think my right hon. Friend's decision will be warmly welcomed by all parties to the proposed merger, as well as across the country. However, one of the considerations is the short time in which Ofcom must carry out the review. Will she therefore ask Ofcom for an interim report part of the way through this period? If there is any obstruction or a need to extend the time, she would then be able to look at the situation sympathetically to ensure that Ofcom can do the proper job we all want it to do.

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend makes an interesting suggestion, but Ofcom has reassured me that it has the time and resources required to produce a report in 40 working days. It is important to remember that we want to make sure that there is sufficient time and scrutiny, and that we provide certainty within a reasonable timeframe, so that all parties can get on with business as usual, whatever that might be.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I warmly congratulate the Secretary of State on her decision. She should bear in mind, however, that historically successive Governments—and Prime Ministers, in particular since Mrs Thatcher—have decided that Rupert and now James Murdoch are fit and proper persons because they own newspapers that support them in general elections. The concentration of ownership is the problem. Sky now has nearly four times as much money to spend every year as the BBC. I hope that we end up in a position in which we maintain diversity in the British ecology, with a strong BBC not being bullied by Murdoch and Sky.

Karen Bradley: I am getting slightly worried, because this is the second time this morning the hon. Gentleman has worked consensually with the Government, but I take note of his comments.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I welcome today's statement, as will many of my constituents who have been in contact with me regarding this matter. I am sure that they will all be happy that the bid is being referred to the regulators. Given that Britain has one of the most concentrated media environments in the world, with three companies controlling 71% of national newspaper circulation and five companies in

[Margaret Ferrier]

command of 81% of local newspapers titles, does the Secretary of State agree that now is the ideal time to review properly the media landscape in Britain?

Karen Bradley: I am very proud of the incredibly diverse free press that we have in this country, and I want to preserve it and ensure that we can enable it to thrive. There was a question in oral questions about local newspapers, and I certainly want local newspapers, and others, to thrive. Through this process, it is important that we ensure that we have a plurality of media and broadcasting. That is why I have asked Ofcom to look at this particular issue.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's decision. I would merely point out that someone has to be a fit and proper person to be a licensed London hackney carriage driver. With that in mind, this is not just a question of the amount of influence that the Murdochs already have; it is their association with so much corruption and illegality, which is still being uncovered even now. I am incredulous that they are being considered for a 100% controlling share of Sky. That must not be allowed to happen.

Karen Bradley: I am sure that Ofcom will have heard the hon. Gentleman's comments. I hope that his comments about fit and proper persons for taxi driving is not a reflection on any experiences he may have had in the past.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on how she is handling this matter which, if I may say so, is better than any Secretary of State since 2010. She says that she cannot respond to any substantive questions on Leveson 2 because it is under judicial review. When will the judicial review be resolved so that we might come back to Leveson 2?

Karen Bradley: The judicial review is a matter for the courts. I am in their hands.

Points of Order

11.58 am

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Yes, I will take a point of order now. There are a couple of Select Committee statements coming, but we can await those with eager anticipation and bated breath. I am sure colleagues do so, but let us first hear the point of order from Mr Christopher Chope.

Mr Chope: In a section headed "Making Commitments on the Floor of the House", paragraph 23.42 of the Cabinet Office guide to making legislation, published in July 2015, states:

"Parliament will hold Ministers to any commitments they make on the floor of the House which are recorded in Hansard. Ministers must, therefore, take care during debates not to make any commitments for which they do not have collective agreement".

My point of order, Mr Speaker, is how can Parliament hold Ministers to those commitments that have been made on the Floor of the House?

Briefly, the background is this. In recent days, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), have told me, the leader of Christchurch borough council and the mayor of Christchurch that they do not regard themselves as bound by the commitment made by the Government to the House on 7 December 2015. On that day, I asked the then Secretary of State:

"Will my right hon. Friend give the House an assurance that amendment 56 will not be used by the Government to force change on any local authority?"

The Secretary of State replied:

"I will indeed."—[*Official Report*, 7 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 822.]

That is pretty clear, and my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) received a similar commitment. How can we hold the Government to account for the commitments that have been made?

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: As his point of order is on the same matter, and it is a case of Tweedledum and Tweedledee, I think that I will hear from the hon. Gentleman.

Sir Edward Leigh: I am a bit insulted to find that I am Tweedledee in your estimation, Mr Speaker.

This is a very serious topic. I have here a copy of the 7 December edition of *Hansard*. I, too, intervened on the then Secretary of State in column 822. Having raised issues concerning Lincolnshire and the desire of the county council and the Government to have a mayor and a unitary authority, I received a specific commitment from the Secretary of State that he would not use amendment 56 to force a unitary authority on Lincolnshire. I received that commitment in terms. All that the Secretary of State said to me was that he would force discussions—that is, he would not prevent discussions

from taking place—but the commitment was absolutely clear. I hope that you, Mr Speaker, will protect the right of the House of Commons to hold Ministers to account.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Members for Christchurch (Mr Chope) and for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) for raising this important matter.

The Chair has no responsibility for the contents of a document or manual issued by the Cabinet Office. That is its interpretation of the responsibility and advised course of action of Ministers. However, the short answer to the hon. Member for Christchurch, who asked me how Ministers are to be held to commitments that they have made: is by interrogation, by scrutiny, and, potentially, if Members judge it fit and appropriate, by criticism, and hence by potential parliamentary or public obloquy in the event of the breach of a commitment made. That is the answer. There is no binding obligation on any Member to do exactly what he or she has said that he or she will do in addressing the House, just as there is no obligation on any Back Bencher.

That said, making a commitment from the Dispatch Box in response to a question or an intervention is a very serious and solemn matter. It is not something that should be treated lightly or cast aside. Nor is it in any sense acceptable for it to be argued—if it were argued—that there has since been a change in the ministerial team; government is, of course, seamless, and responsibility is collective. That is the situation.

I cannot possibly become involved in exchanges or debate about the future make-up of local government in Dorset. I have enough to contend with in trying to make arguments in relation to the structure of local government in my own county of Buckinghamshire in conversations with Ministers. What I will say, however, and it will doubtless be heard by Ministers, is that I know the hon. Member for Christchurch extremely well. I have known him since 1986, and I have known the hon. Member for Gainsborough since 1997. They are both extremely diligent and serious-minded Members of Parliament. If a Minister thinks that a commitment made can subsequently and lightly be abrogated without parliamentary consequence from Members of their calibre, I think that that Minister is, dare I say it, really rather misguided, as such Minister will probably soon discover. The mechanisms available include debates, and that includes Adjournment debates. So these matters will not go away. It is also open to Members to question Ministers, including very, very senior Ministers, about obligations that have been entered into on behalf of the Government.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will know that in the past the Leader of the House would announce not only next week's business, but the business for the week after on a provisional basis. I have noticed that for the last few weeks the Leader of the House has been announcing only next week plus one day, normally the Monday. That is proving difficult for Select Committees and other Committees, which have to arrange their business; for ordinary Members, who would like to be able to organise their diaries better, and for those who have commitments in their constituency.

Delightfully, the Leader of the House has just come back into the Chamber, but the Deputy Leader of the House has been present, and he is a very admirable man

whom we do not hear enough from in the House. Mr Speaker, will you speak to the Leader of the House, to try and encourage him to give us two weeks of parliamentary business, rather than just one at a time?

Mr Speaker: I say two things to the hon. Gentleman. First, the practice of announcing only the first day of the provisional business for the second week is not unknown; there are many precedents for it, although I certainly accept that the norm is that the House receives two weeks of business, so the hon. Gentleman is broadly correct in what he says.

The second observation I would make is that the Leader of the House has toppled into the Chamber at a most fortuitous time. Whether he has done so because he was excited by the hon. Gentleman's point of order or because he wants to listen to the Select Committee statements, I do not know. The Leader of the House is perfectly welcome to spring to his feet and come to the Dispatch Box and respond to the hon. Gentleman, as is the Deputy Leader of the House, but notwithstanding the extraordinary temptation to do so, both of them may feel inclined on this occasion to resist—and it appears that they do. But the hon. Gentleman has made his point, and, for what it is worth, I think that if it is possible, it should be done, but it is not always practicable. I hope my response has been helpful.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance. On 23 October last year, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport issued a press release indicating that from spring 2017 film directors would face fines of up to £500,000 from the Information Commissioner's office if found to be in breach of the privacy and electronic communications regulations. Incidentally, this information is still published on the gov.uk website and is exactly what I have called for in my ten-minute rule Bill.

In response to a letter I wrote to the Secretary of State on 17 January 2017 asking for confirmation of the timing of this legislation, I was told on 8 February:

“The Government intends to publish its consultation on this measure shortly.”

I was so surprised by the mention of a consultation—something that had hitherto not been mentioned either by the Government or in the press release, or, indeed, on their website—that I submitted a written question on 21 February trying to establish if the spring 2017 deadline could still be met. In the response to that, received on 2 March, I was told that a consultation would be issued “during this session of Parliament”.

On 2 March I sought further clarification via another written question and was told on 10 March that the intention was to issue a consultation “in due course.”

This is a matter of great import to a huge number of people, and we have arguably already entered spring and the consultation has not begun, and was not even initially mentioned by the Government. Therefore, I am at a loss to understand how the Government can possibly meet their own deadline on this issue. Can you offer me guidance, Mr Speaker, as to how I can establish what the Government Department is doing to ensure it meets its own timetable and how I can best elicit that information, given that letters to the Secretary of State and written questions appear not to be effective in achieving that?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order, of which she gave me advance notice.

It is very difficult for the Chair to assist the hon. Lady. First, I would say that Governments of both hues in this country have not always been overly preoccupied with meeting their own deadlines. It has not always been regarded as an overriding priority by them, although it is often the case that people who have depended upon their words would prefer a greater fidelity to the commitment that has been made.

Secondly, as the hon. Lady will know, there is often something of a debate about what falls within the seasons of the year. It is not uncommon for Ministers in a Government to refer to an intention to do something “in the spring”, for instance, and for them sometimes to have a slightly different interpretation of the period covered by a season of the year from that which hon. Members or members of the public might have.

Thirdly, I have been advised by the Clerk, who has helpfully volunteered some text to me, that it is not unprecedented for Government Departments to be unspecific about when they are going to do something. However, I am sure that the hon. Lady will use her ingenuity to pursue the matter further. My advice to her is almost, if you will, geographical advice. It is that she should wend her way to the Table Office to see what sort of questions she can table that might provide satisfaction. I do not wish to be unkind to her, as she is an extremely diligent Member, but my broad advice to her—not merely as Speaker but as someone who was for 12 years a parliamentarian mainly sitting on the Back Benches—is that she should make as much of a nuisance of herself as she possibly can. That might avail her. She needs to persist to such a degree that Ministers feel that it is better to provide satisfaction to her.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have been informed by sources in the media that the Prime Minister is going to make a significant statement on the Scottish constitution this

afternoon. Have you had any notification of a prime ministerial statement? Most of us were here at Prime Minister’s questions yesterday, when she was asked many questions about the Scottish constitution and gave incredibly inadequate answers. It would be surprising, would it not, if there had subsequently been a development in her thinking and that she would want to put out a statement without the effective parliamentary scrutiny that such an important announcement—as it is being advertised—would demand. The Leader of the House is in his place. I know that he cannot be held responsible for every sin of this Government—that would be too much for any human being—but perhaps he can tell us if it is indeed the case that the Prime Minister intends to make such a statement and, if so, why she is not coming to the Dispatch Box for effective questioning by Members of Parliament.

Mr Speaker: It has to be said that, not for the first time, I have learned of something from the right hon. Gentleman. I was not aware—because nobody had told me—of any possible public statement of the kind that he envisages. Secondly, it is not always completely to be assumed that what is bruited in the media is correct. There may be no plan for any such statement today. It could even conceivably be a quiet news day, leading some people in the media to speculate that there will be such a statement, or that they would like such a statement to be made, or that there ought to be one. I am not aware that there is intended to be any such statement. The Prime Minister has, over many years, including during her tenure as Home Secretary, been fastidious in coming to the House to make statements on important policy developments. I am not aware of any plan for her to do so today, but if she were minded to make a public statement of the kind that the right hon. Gentleman envisages, and wanted to come to the House to do so, it would be open to her to do that. Whatever other plans I might have for the day, I would happily reschedule them in order to be in my place to hear the Prime Minister. Perhaps we can leave that there for now.

Chilcot Inquiry

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Mr Speaker: We now come to the first Select Committee statement. I cannot resist observing that this is the latest of the statements to the House from the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), and that, as a Select Committee Chair, no one has taken more seriously his responsibilities in these matters or more enthusiastically availed himself of the opportunity to make such statements to the House. Perhaps other Select Committee Chairs will copy the hon. Gentleman in due course; it remains to be seen. The hon. Gentleman will speak on his subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I—or whoever is in the Chair—will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and ask the hon. Gentleman to respond to them in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions and should be brief. The Front Bench may take part in questioning. I call the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee of the House, Mr Bernard Jenkin.

12.15 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con) (*Select Committee Statement*): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for providing time for me to present our 10th report of this Session, entitled “Lessons still to be learned from the Chilcot Inquiry”. The decision to invade Iraq has left an indelible scar on British politics. It continues to be as controversial today as it was at the time, not least because it became apparent after the invasion that it was to become a protracted and bloody affair, costing the lives of 179 UK servicemen and women, as well as those of our allies and of thousands of people in Iraq. The consequences of the decision to invade Iraq remain profound, not only for domestic politics but for our foreign and security policy and the stability of the region.

The Chilcot inquiry was established in 2009 to provide some closure to the controversy. However, in the minds of many, it was already far too late. I am reminded that the House of Commons first voted on the question of whether to have an inquiry in 2002, on a Conservative Opposition motion. For many, the length of the inquiry that was eventually established has itself been subject to extensive criticism. Most of the reporting and discussion of the Chilcot inquiry has been preoccupied with the substance of the decision to go to war, its legality, and what happened in the aftermath of the invasion. Yet there are also lessons still to be learned regarding the machinery of government and how it operated and regarding the conduct of public inquiries, and that is what Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee therefore agreed to focus on.

PACAC’s report, launched today, examines the striking extent to which Cabinet government and collective decision making were sidelined by the then Prime Minister in the run-up to the Iraq war. As was made clear in the Chilcot report, significant decisions on Iraq, pre-conflict, were taken without sufficient consultation of Cabinet colleagues. Chilcot concludes that there were 11 decision points prior to the invasion on which there

“should have been collective discussion by a Cabinet Committee or small group of Ministers on the basis of inter-departmental advice agreed at a senior level between officials”.

A worrying finding of PACAC’s report is that, if so inclined, a future Prime Minister could override the proper procedures of collective decision making without obstacle. Beyond making representations to Ministers and to the Prime Minister, and short of resignation, a Cabinet Secretary does not have any formal recourse to object if a Prime Minister chooses to disregard the procedures for decision making set out in the Cabinet manual. PACAC is in no doubt that this absence of safeguards cannot persist, and this leads to perhaps the most important conclusion in our report.

We recommend, in line with a proposal from the Better Government initiative, that the Cabinet Secretary and/or senior officials should be able to require a formal letter of direction if they are being instructed to carry out the wishes of the Prime Minister disregarding the normal procedures set out in the Cabinet manual. That would both safeguard the Cabinet Secretary’s independence and clarify their responsibility. It would also make clear to Ministers the vital importance of following proper procedure.

The second key finding of PACAC’s report relates to the establishment, role and conduct of the Chilcot inquiry itself and builds on the work of PACAC’s predecessor committee, the Public Administration Committee, which carried out a number of inquiries into the conduct and effectiveness of public inquiries. PACAC recommends that in future, before an inquiry is established, Parliament should set up an ad hoc Select Committee to take evidence on the proposed remit of the inquiry and to present formal conclusions and recommendations to the House. There should then be a full debate and vote in Parliament on an amendable motion setting out the precise terms of reference and an estimated timeframe and proposed budget for the inquiry. That should ensure that, in future, expectations are much clearer at the outset of an inquiry.

PACAC has not sought to reopen all the issues explored by Chilcot; nor has it explored whether Parliament was deliberately misled by the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Tony Blair. However, by highlighting what the Chilcot inquiry revealed about the weaknesses in the Government’s decision-making procedures, and by exploring what lessons can be learned from the inquiry for the conduct of other public inquiries, I hope that we can ensure that the processes are in place that may enable such controversies to be avoided in future. I commend the report to the House.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): I will follow the strictures to be brief.

On Iraq, the British Cabinet, the overwhelming majority in the House, much of the media, the three Select Committees, the civil service, the MOD, and the security services all came to the same false conclusion, resulting in a disastrous military adventure and deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. Subsequently, the usual and predictable procrastination, prevarication and obfuscation have, in the end, failed to reveal to the British people the truth of what happened.

The Select Committee’s report is clear that the Chilcot report failed to allow the Committee to answer the central question of whether Parliament was deliberately

[Jon Trickett]

misled, leaving a gaping chasm right in the heart of the credibility of the British establishment. What a damning judgment after all these years.

I welcome the various recommendations in today's report, particularly on strengthening the independence of the Cabinet Secretary and the role of the Commons, but the recommendations are, frankly, timid. Does the Chair, and perhaps his Select Committee, agree that root and branch transformative change of all our political structures and culture is required before we can honestly say to the British people that there will never again be such a failure?

Mr Jenkin: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. I voted for the Iraq invasion. I still do not know whether I would have voted the same way had we known much more about it. The salient part is the lack of preparation, and I would not have voted for it had I thought that there had been so little preparation. Having said that, I think the jury is still out on whether, in the long term, the invasion of Iraq will have been of benefit to global peace and security.

On whether Parliament was deliberately misled, the Select Committee just did not feel qualified to make that judgment. We do not have the procedures and wherewithal in this House to conduct a fair trial of the facts. Were such a Committee to be established to do that, it would need to be a very different kind of Committee with a different kind of quasi-judicial procedures. We suggest that the House should be prepared to do that if further facts and information emerge, but Sir John Chilcot was clear that he did not hold former Prime Minister Tony Blair culpable in deliberately misleading the House, and we have to accept that view.

Finally, on whether our recommendations are timid, they are limited to what we felt able to make recommendations about. However we organise our politics, I am afraid that there will always be occasions when things go wrong. I do not think that any constitutional structure can protect us from that, although we have made some recommendations that would prevent certain things from happening again.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Being a member of the Select Committee, I come at this from a position similar to that of my hon. Friend who chairs it with such distinction, which is reflected in the calibre of the report. I have my doubts about whether my vote would have been different had we had more facts, but we take our votes in this House on the facts that are presented to us and then we move forward; we do not get our time over again to relive our votes.

One concern that we were able to cover in the report was the length of time and the unacceptable delays associated with the Chilcot report. The Cabinet Secretary indicated that the Government would consider further the question of how the Iraq inquiry could have been carried out more quickly. We urge that that assessment comes as a matter of urgency, so has my hon. Friend received any indication of the timescale, or will we be waiting a long time, as we did for the inquiry itself?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. On the matter of timescales, we have until about 12.35 pm, which leaves about 10 minutes to get quite a few people in. If we can keep answers and questions a bit briefer, that would be great.

Mr Jenkin: I will endeavour to be extremely brief. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her question, her participation in the Select Committee and her contribution to the report. The answer is that we are making recommendations about the conduct of inquiries, and I doubt whether the Government will like them because they would limit their control over the process. Most Governments establish public inquiries to avoid issues, not to explore them and open them up. Why did it take so long to get this inquiry? Our report is as much addressed to what the House must take control of itself in order to ensure that inquiries are better conducted in future.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): I congratulate the Select Committee, although I am surprised to hear the Chairman say that the jury is still out on the Iraq war. In terms of public opinion, the jury is in, the verdict has been delivered, and the former Prime Minister has been indicted and rightfully so, although I would have preferred more formal proceedings to those which he faced.

The crucial subject matter in the report boils down to two things. First, I congratulate the Committee on the invention of the letter of direction, which is similar to the financial direction that is part of Government accountability. Perhaps the Chairman could say a bit more about that and about why he thinks it would be effective in avoiding the total and absolute breakdown of collective responsibility that was identified in the Chilcot report.

Secondly, the Committee has not been able to make as much progress on the question of parliamentary accountability. If someone, such as the former Prime Minister, says one thing to the American President, and then says something else or does not say anything to the House of Commons, that is *prima facie* a misleading of the House of Commons. To avoid that accountability, either one sets up a series of inquiries with limited remit that are unable to adjudicate on that which was done, or one spins things out for so long that by the time there is an inquiry with a big enough remit everybody says, "Why are we raking over the past?" If we allow that to stand, there is no effective parliamentary accountability. Can the Chairman see that the timeous nature of parliamentary accountability and our responsibility can be effected in his report and a mechanism produced so that we have the obligation to take forward what our constituents demand, which is to hold any Prime Minister who behaves in the same way as the former Prime Minister to account in a proper and timeous fashion?

Mr Jenkin: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. The letter of direction should not be a controversial matter, because we already have it in our procedures for financial matters, as he says. One or two former Cabinet Secretaries have bridled at that, but others are very much in support. It does not interfere with the substance of policy; it merely ensures that proper process is covered. We recommend not that the letter of the direction,

which may come at a sensitive time or involve a sensitive issue, should automatically be made public, but that it should, if appropriate and at the behest of the Cabinet Secretary, be made privately available to an appropriate Select Committee, to the Intelligence and Security Committee, to members of the Privy Council or to the Leader of the Opposition. It is just another lever for a Cabinet Secretary to use to secure their independence and the proper process set down in the Cabinet manual that Prime Ministers have agreed to in principle.

On parliamentary accountability and the Prime Minister, it remains open to this House to set up a special Select Committee or privileges Committee to establish proper procedures and provide fair representation for the prosecution and for the defence, but it would be a completely new procedure. Nothing like that has been done in the era when we expect natural justice to be carried to far higher standards. We cannot have a posse of MPs, all of whom have known views on such issues, acting as some kangaroo court to arraign a former Prime Minister. That would be ridiculous and would not do this House any good.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): On the establishment of inquiries, my hon. Friend will be aware that the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport is considering whether to reconvene the Leveson inquiry, which has already sat for 15 months, at a cost of more than £5 million, to examine events approaching 10 years ago. What advice would he give to the Secretary of State?

Mr Jenkin: As perhaps should have been done with the child sex abuse inquiry, I suggest that the Secretary of State comes to this House to ask for a Committee to be set up. Let us have an inquiry into the inquiry before we get stuck on the tramlines of legality and appointing people. She should look before she leaps and accept that Governments should not be able to establish inquiries to get themselves out of inconvenient difficulties. The House is here to assist such scrutiny, and it should be here to provide oversight so that an inquiry is properly conducted in a timely fashion.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): I am a member of the Select Committee. I supported the publication of the report, but in the spirit of acquiescence rather than enthusiasm. The Chairman will recall that I was uneasy about one or two phrases that were subsequently corrected. In particular, does he agree with our inserting the possibility of a further inquiry—not by our Select Committee but possibly by others—if further evidence comes to light?

I personally believe that we were misled by the then Prime Minister on weapons of mass destruction and the pretext for war. I was one of 139 Labour MPs who voted against the war, and I stand by that decision. Some of the unease I feel was expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett). Does the Chairman accept that I expressed some unease at the time? I support the publication of the report, particularly the recommendation that it might be worth while for a future inquiry to be carried out, not by our Select Committee but by others.

Mr Jenkin: The hon. Gentleman has been a trouper on the Committee for many years. I accept that this was a difficult inquiry to agree. In our draft, because we

were concentrating on process and procedures rather than on the substance of the issues, we had to reflect some of the tone of the anxiety that so many people feel about this issue. I hope he felt able and comfortable to support the inquiry. He fully supports our recommendations, for which I am grateful.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the overriding lesson that most people will think we can learn from Chilcot is that such reports take too long and cost too much?

Mr Jenkin: The inquiry is an extraordinarily thorough piece of work. Sir John Chilcot should be commended for what he achieved, the detail he went into and the seriousness with which he approached the inquiry, but it was not what the public initially expected. The Crimean war was in many respects a far bigger disaster, but the inquiry into that was conducted in the space of a few months, which I think is what the public hoped for with Chilcot—there were some fairly obvious top-level things.

We conduct inquiries using Salmon letters—the Maxwellisation process—and there is a tremendous sense of obligation to provide people with fairness in inquiries that perhaps did not exist after the Crimean war. We need to set down parameters for such inquiries, which is what a Select Committee would do if it studied an inquiry before it was set up. A Select Committee would set those parameters in a motion establishing the inquiry.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I found out only by accident that the statement was taking place. I have not read the report, but I listened with interest to the hon. Gentleman's statement. Nobody would disagree with due process. I sent out this Twitter message two hours ago:

"My thoughts are with the victims and survivors of Saddam Hussein's genocidal campaign in Halabja, 28 years ago today."

That campaign is one of the reasons why I and many others, the majority in this House, voted for the war.

Mr Jenkin: I am grateful for the right hon. Lady's kind remarks, and it is important that we make such Select Committee statements because they engage more Members in our reports. I regard our report as a serious piece of work that makes serious recommendations, and hon. and right hon. Members of all views on the original conflict can embrace it as a better way of making such decisions in government and a better way of conducting public inquiries.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): As a member of the Select Committee, I point out that the Chilcot inquiry was about identifying mistakes that led to loss of life, military and civilian. With that in mind, it is unacceptable that the inquiry took seven years to reach a conclusion. Those mistakes could have been repeated in that timescale. However, the Committee points out:

"The Iraq Inquiry reported that the Blair Government did not expose key policy decisions to rigorous review."

Backing that up, paragraph 63 says:

"Cabinet was...being asked to confirm the decision that the diplomatic process was at an end and that the House of Commons should be asked to endorse the use of military action to enforce Iraq's compliance. Given the gravity of this decision, Cabinet should have been made aware of the legal uncertainties."

[*Ronnie Cowan*]

I put it to the Chairman that the evidence provided to the Cabinet appears to have been designed to produce the result that the then Prime Minister was looking for.

Mr Jenkin: I think that is an accurate comment, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his contribution to the Committee and this report. It cuts both ways, because the Cabinet went along with being sidelined. Chilcot was clear that plenty of Cabinet Ministers were quite content to leave it to others to make the decisions when they had the right to insist on being consulted. Our report addresses how the legal advice was taken, explored and discussed by the Cabinet, and we make recommendations about that. Our proposals make clear what Cabinet Ministers are entitled to expect. It is not a favour to ask that of the Prime Minister; it is part of the proper procedure of Cabinet government. We do not have a superannuated presidency in this country. We have a constitutional Cabinet Government, which should be reinforced by these proposals.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I am also a member of the Committee, but I do not support this report because I believe it has been interpreted by the press as an act of absolution for the Prime Minister involved and the other culpable people who were led by him, principally the three Select Committees of this House. Going to war was the worst blunder this House committed since sending troops to the Suez war. We should be objective in dealing with our blunders and, although this report has many merits, it does not address the truth that we were led into an avoidable war by a man of vanity who was in a messianic mood—he misled the House in a very serious way.

The hon. Gentleman's report contains evidence from Dr Rangwala, who rightly says that there are two interpretations of the evidence before Chilcot. One interpretation, which the report suggests should be referred to the Privileges Committee, might lead us to conclude that we went to war in vain. We must remember the principal need to avoid sending soldiers to war in future because of the vanity or inflexibility of this House in making fair judgments. We have that responsibility. If we do not condemn the errors of the past, we are responsible for them.

Mr Jenkin: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his work on the Committee, and I respect that we differ on the report. I appreciate the emphasis he wants to

make by declining to support the report, but it is open to the House at any time to refer any matter to the Committee of Privileges. There is a procedure for doing that, and he should try to implement it if he thinks there is a case for doing so.

The difficulty, as the Chilcot inquiry said, is that there are two interpretations of all this and that there is no definitive evidence to suggest culpability or that the former Prime Minister deliberately sought to mislead the House. There are lots of lessons to be learned. As an aside, for the House to be able to make an informed decision, it relies entirely on what the Government tell it. We are in a new era in which the House is consulted about such things, which never used to be the case. We used to have rather more retrospective accountability on such matters, rather than forward accountability, and I question whether such forward accountability works. I do not think the House of Commons is competent to make strategic judgments on the spur of the moment and in the heat of a crisis in the way that a Government should be.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): As a new Member in 2015, what struck me about the whole Chilcot experience was the unacceptable delay. As the hon. Gentleman just said, we in this place want to take educated decisions, based on evidence, so for us—and more so for the families of the soldiers who died—the length of time it took to produce the report was unacceptable. He made welcome recommendations about having a stricter remit and stricter timing for such inquiries. How can we take that forward in this House to make it happen? Do we need to have a vote on it, or is it in the Government's gift to do or not do this?

Mr Jenkin: Ultimately, it is in the hands of this House, subject to whipping and all the pressures that are put on it, to decide how inquiries are conducted. If the Government are setting up an inquiry that this House does not like, this House can stop it; we are a sovereign House and that is what we should do. I agree so much with the hon. Gentleman's comment that the length of time this took was unacceptable. Indeed, we make the point that it undermined not only the credibility of the inquiry, but the very confidence in public institutions that it was intended to try to restore. It did not serve the purpose that this House might have wanted it to serve because it took so long, and of course it was grievous torture for the families of those who had lost life and limb in this conflict.

Suicide Prevention

HEALTH COMMITTEE

12.41 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con) (*Select Committee Statement*): The scale of the avoidable loss of life from suicide is unacceptable. In 2015, 4,820 people in England took their own lives, and across the UK 6,122 people did so in 2014. But those official figures underestimate the true scale of the devastating loss from suicide, which remains the leading cause of death in young people between the ages of 15 and 24, and it is the leading cause of death in men under 50. It is strongly linked to deprivation and is a major contributor to health inequality. However, the key message our Committee heard throughout its inquiry is that suicide is preventable, and we can and should be doing far more to make sure we reduce it. That was the key focus of our suicide prevention inquiry.

First, let me thank all those who contributed to the inquiry, particularly families bereaved by suicide, and those who had experienced suicidal ideation and been users of mental health services. Their evidence was courageous and compelling. I also thank all the voluntary groups and volunteers who are working to provide support for people in crisis, and all our front-line staff. Finally, I thank my fellow Committee members and our Committee staff, particularly Laura Daniels, Katya Cassidy and Huw Yardley.

I shall now move on to what we found in our inquiry. First, let me say to the Government that we welcome their suicide prevention strategy, but as with any strategy the key is implementation. We therefore call on them to go far further in implementing and resourcing it, and to give greater attention to the workforce in order to make the important improvements come forward. We also make further recommendations and we are disappointed that the Government have not gone further in a number of areas. We know that we can take actions to reduce suicide and we highlight a number of these in our report. For example, we know that half of those who take their own lives have previously self-harmed, and we feel it is really disappointing that the experience of so many of those who have self-harmed when they go to casualty departments is that they are made to feel that they are wasting people's time. We know that liaison psychiatry makes an enormous difference, but there are resourcing issues on that.

We also know that those who have been in-patients in mental health settings should receive a visit within three days of leaving in-patient services, but there simply are not the resources available for that to be put in place. We call on the Government to go further in looking at the workforce and resourcing needed for that to happen. We know of other serious issues, for example, the fact that about a third of people who take their own lives are not in contact with either primary care or specialist health services in the year before their death. We feel that suicide is everyone's business and we all have a responsibility to reduce the stigma attached to mental health so that it is easier for people to seek help. Again, I pay tribute to all those who are working in this field, reaching out to people in non-health settings and making a real difference. However, many of those voluntary groups are coming under great financial pressure. It is welcome that the Government have announced that

there will be £5 million for suicide prevention, although that does not come in until next year, with £10 million in each of the subsequent two years. However, we feel that that is too little, too late, particularly given the cuts to public health grants and across local authorities to those services that can reach out to people who are vulnerable to suicide.

We would like the Government to put a greater focus on adequately resourcing the measures they set out in their suicide prevention strategy. We would particularly like them to look at how those plans are being implemented. It is very welcome that 95% of local authorities have a suicide prevention plan either in place or in development, but there does not seem to be sufficient quality assurance for those plans. We would therefore like a national implementation board to look at how we can move those plans forward, because any strategy, however good, cannot be effective if it is sitting on the shelf and not being implemented. That was one of the key messages we heard from our witnesses, and I know that the Minister will have heard it from the National Suicide Prevention Strategy Advisory Group loud and clear.

We also know that there are things that need to happen when people are in contact with services. It is disappointing that greater focus has not been put on the consensus statement for information sharing. On too many occasions, when someone hears that a loved one has taken their life it is the first time they have heard that their loved one had been in contact with services—nobody had let them know. Understandably, health professionals are concerned about issues of confidentiality and consent, but what the consensus statement makes clear is that if we ask people in the right way, they are much more likely to give that consent to information sharing. We would like to have seen the Government put a greater focus on how we can increase awareness of how health professionals go about sharing information with people's loved ones, because we believe that will save lives.

We think that measures can be taken across the board both out in the community and within health care settings and specialist settings, but the Minister will know that our inquiry also examines the role of the media. Irresponsible reporting of suicide increases suicide rates, as we know, and far more can be done within the broadcast media, the mainstream media, on social media and on the internet to make sure that we save lives. I was very pleased that during today's Culture, Media and Sport questions the Culture Secretary agreed to a meeting with me, but I hope that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), will assure me that she will be liaising with colleagues in the Government to make sure we can save lives in that way.

Finally, I wish to touch on the issue of data. We know that there is an issue relating to the increasing use of narrative verdicts which are hard to code. That results in the official data we have on suicide under-representing the true scale of the avoidable loss of life, and with the huge variation we have around the country this makes it much more difficult to understand what works best in preventing suicide. We would like the Minister to revisit the recommendations in our report on how to provide better training to coroners and how we review the evidential standard and move from using "beyond reasonable doubt" to the "balance of probability" in recording suicide. Only in that way can we ensure that

[Dr Sarah Wollaston]

we are doing absolutely everything possible to protect families and individuals in future. I commend the report on suicide prevention to the House and call on the Government to go further in implementation.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Labour welcomes the recommendations in the report, and I join the hon. Lady in thanking Select Committee members and staff for their work.

The Committee visited the award-winning Salford mental health liaison team, which offers 24/7 mental health support at Salford Royal hospital and has been able to halve the admission rates for people with mental health problems. The Royal College of Psychiatrists reminds us that only 7% of emergency departments provide 24/7 liaison psychiatry services, and said it would be difficult to recruit enough psychiatrists and other staff to provide such a service in every hospital—the hon. Lady touched on that in her statement. What does she think the Government must do to ensure that there are enough trained staff to establish and sustain liaison psychiatry services in every acute hospital to help to deliver the suicide prevention strategy?

Dr Wollaston: We need to start right back at medical school recruitment and what happens in medical schools and beyond, to encourage more health professionals—not just doctors, but nurses as well—to consider psychiatry and mental health services as a career. One of the key issues is the lack of a workforce. I know the Government are working with Health Education England to improve the situation, but we would like to see them go further. Also, we need to ensure that resources get to the frontline.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her chairmanship of the Select Committee and its recent report. She will know that recent studies, particularly one done in Sweden, have indicated that people with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder have a ninefold increased suicide risk. What more could be done to help those individuals and their families? How can we raise awareness among the agencies that intervene with them and their families, and particularly among health professionals, so that they are aware of the heightened risk?

Dr Wollaston: I commend the work my right hon. Friend has done over her whole career on autism and to highlight what more can be done to help those individuals and their families. She will know that one of the key barriers is having an assessment in the first place for people who suffer from autism. Too often, they fall between the gaps in mental health services. My key message would be that we must ensure that they receive the services and support that they need and that that is delivered in the right way.

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this critical issue to the House and I fully support the report. I declare an interest as the patron of Chris's House, a centre for help, response and, critically, intervention on suicide, and the first 24-hour interventionist suicide support service in Scotland. We set up the centre to offer a safe environment in which people in crisis may

have respite from their current unwellness. They can find refuge in Chris's House and receive an individually tailored programme to offer support and respite throughout their journey to wellbeing. I urge others throughout the UK to look at this more interventionist model and replicate it to the benefit of all UK citizens. I further urge as many people as possible to join us in our Walk of Hope on 6 May 2017 in Glasgow, as we walk from darkness to light to raise awareness about suicide prevention.

Dr Wollaston: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution and join him in paying tribute to voluntary groups throughout the country that are doing extraordinary work to reach out to people in crisis. As he will know, the level of variation in support is a key issue, along with the financial challenge faced by people around the UK who are trying to provide proper support.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend very much indeed for the work that she and her Committee have done on this issue. The suicide rate among men is three times that among women, and the gap has increased since 1981. As she mentioned, suicide is the leading cause of death for men under 50. A particular problem is contagion, whereby one suicide can often lead to a spate of others in the same area. During the inquiry, did the Committee identify how this aspect could be dealt with?

Dr Wollaston: I thank my hon. Friend for his important question. We absolutely looked at that issue and specifically mentioned it in our report. He will know that part of the problem is that irresponsible reporting can sometimes lead to contagion. We know that when local areas work together closely to identify suicides, particularly early clusters, measures can be taken—people can go into workplaces, schools and colleges—to provide support and stop it. It does, though, require that we notice it early, so the Committee urges coroners to work with local authorities and public health teams to ensure that they are aware of the high risk of suicides spreading.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the Select Committee and the hon. Lady for the report. The Scottish National party welcomes the recommendations and urges that they are fully taken into account. We particularly urge the Government to commit to rolling out crisis intervention teams and support to prevent suicide, so that people in such circumstances can be followed up directly. Suicidal individuals are not always mentally ill, and lengthy waiting lists for psychological treatment or attendance at A&E are sometimes not the most appropriate options. Liaison psychiatry is under-resourced, and urgent follow-up through crisis support is needed. How will we ensure liaison between services? Only when that occurs seamlessly between health, social care, community services and criminal justice will we prevent suicidal individuals from falling between the gaps.

Dr Wollaston: I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting a really important point about the need for communication, not only with families but within services. One problem is that there is what happens in local authorities and what happens in the health service, and too often there is not sufficient communication between the two.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Lady and her Select Committee on their work. She might be aware that in the mid-2000s there was a series of tragic suicides across the Bridgend County Borough Council area, of which my constituency forms part. I obviously was not a Member of this House when those suicides took place, but they are a major part of people's memories of what happened across those communities.

On media attention, the hon. Lady may be aware that a film was made about those suicides that was not welcomed by the various communities; I am glad she is pursuing the part of the report on tackling the media impact regarding the glorification of suicide, if I can put it like that. Suicide prevention and health policy more widely are devolved to the Welsh Government, but will she consider sharing the Select Committee's report with the Welsh Assembly's Health, Social Care and Sport Committee? I passionately believe that if we can learn best practice on tackling suicides from Select Committees in the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly or, indeed, the Welsh Assembly, we should share that throughout the UK.

Dr Wollaston: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman and share the report, as he suggests, because I agree that we should be sharing best practice throughout the devolved nations and England. On the specific point about the role of the media, the Samaritans has produced really clear guidelines, which I hope all media organisations will look at closely. We should also go beyond broadcast and print media and look at the role of social media and the internet.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): I welcome the Health Committee's report on suicide prevention and congratulate my hon. Friend and her Committee on their work on this very important issue. I join her in thanking those with lived experience who bravely contributed to the Committee's work; the impact of their contribution cannot be overestimated.

Every death by suicide is a tragedy that has a devastating effect on families and communities, which is why the Government are committed to reducing the national suicide rate by 10% by 2020. We want all areas to learn lessons from organisations such as Mersey Care, with its zero suicide ambition. We were particularly grateful that the Committee published an interim report in December, as it allowed us to address many of its recommendations in our update of the national strategy. These included how we are driving local delivery, addressing stigma, improving suicide bereavement services and increasing awareness of the consensus statement for information sharing for people at risk of suicide. However, we do accept that we need to go further on implementing the cross-Government national suicide prevention strategy, which is why we published the

updated strategy to strengthen delivery in key areas, including in implementation. It is also why we will continue to provide further updates.

The refreshed strategy now includes better targeting of high-risk groups and, for the first time, addresses self-harm as an issue in its own right, which is one of the most significant issues of suicide risk. We are working with the National Suicide Prevention Strategy Advisory Group, delivery partners across Government, and other agencies and stakeholders to develop an improved implementation framework.

We are already making good progress in ensuring that all local areas have a suicide prevention plan in place by the end of the year. To date, 95% of local areas have a suicide prevention plan in place or in development. We will also work with local areas to assess the quality of those plans, building on guidance on good practice. We have run a series of suicide-prevention planning masterclasses carried out by Public Health England to improve that quality. We have also published guidance to local authorities in January on developing and providing suicide bereavement services as an important plank of the plan.

Furthermore, we have announced that we will publish a Green Paper this year on children and young people's mental health and develop a national internet strategy, which will explore the impact of the internet and social media on suicide prevention and mental health. That will address some of the issues that my hon. Friend has raised about the media and suicide. Hon. Members will also know that we are committed to all A&Es having core liaison services by 2020. They have rightly raised the fact that the workforce will be essential in delivering that ambition, and we will imminently be publishing our mental health workforce strategy, the performance of which I am sure that the Select Committee will closely scrutinise. We will carefully consider all the recommendations made by the Committee in this report and respond to them in due course.

My hon. Friend has rightly raised the connection between mental health services and suicide prevention. Does she agree that we cannot think about suicide without considering the broader matter of mental health? Will she and the Committee join me in welcoming the wide range of measures set out by the Prime Minister in January, in addition to the five year forward view for mental health, with a focus on earlier intervention and prevention in mental health services, because those improvements will be essential if we are to make the progress on suicide prevention that all of us in this House want to see?

Dr Wollaston: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for her comments and agree with her absolutely about the importance of prevention and early intervention. I look forward to the strategies to which she has referred and to working with her to do all that we can to improve mental health and to reduce the terrible toll from suicide.

Backbench Business

Energy Prices

1.2 pm

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House deplores the big six energy firms' treatment of out-of-contract energy customers on default tariffs; believes immediate action is needed to protect those consumers, and that pushing customers to start switching will not fix the problem sufficiently quickly or completely on its own; and calls on the industry, regulators and the Government to consider solutions which recognise that many people lead busy lives and that switching their energy supplier may not always be a high priority.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for finding the time for us to debate this important and topical motion today. I also thank my two co-sponsors, the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), and the 50 or so MPs from across the political spectrum who all feel that the treatment of most energy customers is sufficiently outrageous and unjust to merit raising it here, in the mother of all Parliaments.

Most industries believe that customer loyalty is hugely important; an asset to be prized. Most businesses reward their most loyal customers with special treatment to keep them coming back—whether it is a supermarket's loyalty card, an airline's air miles scheme or just the coffee card that gives you a free cuppa after it has been stamped 10 times. Energy is an exception. What other industry does not give its most loyal customers any discounts or special deals, but instead charges them higher prices than anyone else? Which companies believe that loyalty should be exploited, not rewarded? Which one of them treats their longest-serving customers as chumps, to be quietly and secretly switched on to expensive, unfair deals when they are not looking, and then milked—ripped off mercilessly for as long as possible? The answer is the big six energy firms. The rest of the energy industry is pretty good. There are 30 or more newish energy firms snapping at the heels of the big six, and they understand that customer loyalty matters if they want to grow.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): As my hon. Friend will know, there has been a huge roll-out of smart meters, which is one way of people keeping an eye on their energy bills. Unfortunately, though, when people do switch providers, they find that their smart meter has to be replaced at the same time. Does he agree that that is one reason why perhaps some people are becoming unwilling to change providers?

John Penrose: There are many reasons why switching has not caught on to anything like the degree that we need it to if we are to transform the sector. I understand that one factor may very well be this problem with the introduction of smart meters, but there are others, too. My hon. Friend was quite right to point that issue out, and I will mention some others later on in my speech.

As I said, there are 30 or more newish energy firms snapping at the heels of the big six, and they understand that loyalty matters. Obviously, some are more impressive than others, but they all have one thing in common:

they are hungry. They know they have to impress and delight their clients, because they cannot rely on exploiting a “back book” of long-term customers to stay fat and happy. The figures are stark. Roughly two thirds of all customers—at least 20 million households—are on the expensive, rip-off deals: the standard variable tariff. A minority of customers switch to a different energy supplier regularly, but most of us do not. The amount of switching has been creeping upwards, but much of the change has come from the same bargain hunters churning round and round in ever faster circles between different energy firms. The number of households that have rarely or never switched remains stubbornly high, which suits the big six just fine. So, what is the answer? How do we put energy customers in the driving seat? Do we give them the same power to choose a new supplier as easily as we switch to a different brand of toothpaste or coffee? How do we make them compete to delight us, rather than quietly exploiting us?

First, we have to make switching a lot easier. Choosing that different brand of toothpaste in a supermarket is easy: we just pick a different tube off the shelf. Too many people find switching to a different energy firm scary and stressful, and are frightened off as a result. Even the price comparison sites, which have an interest in making the process as simple and as easy as possible, say that huge numbers of customers abandon their search when they are asked a basic, essential question such as what is their current energy usage. Others think that switching is likely to go wrong, and that they might end up cold and shivering in a home without power if the move does not happen smoothly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) has already mentioned the impact on some households of the new smart meters. Others simply have not got the time to switch. Many of us lead busy lives, juggling careers, childcare, school runs and goodness knows what else. Switching our energy supplier can easily become one of those things that we all know we should do, like washing the car or joining a gym, but we never quite get round to doing. The difference is that other products do not automatically switch us to a super-expensive brand of toothpaste or coffee unless we tell them not to. They do not expect us to be on our toes all the time to stop them changing the terms of our deal and ripping us off when we are not looking. For toothpaste, coffee and almost everything else, loyalty and inertia work in the customer's favour; they are on our side. That does not apply to energy. If we relax, they will have us.

Fortunately, there are some simple things that make switching easier, less stressful, simpler and not so scary. The main one is making our customer data easily available to a new energy firm if we give them our permission. That way we do not have to fill in endless online pages with information that we cannot remember or that we have not got. At the moment, the information can take days to come through, and the big six throw all sorts of obstacles in the way. They have no interest in making it easy or simple.

In future, we should just be able to ask our new firm to get it from our existing supplier in a few seconds, with a click of a mouse or a tick of a box—simple, quick, easy and safe. The number of people switching will go through the roof if we do that.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a very good point, and I agree with it. Does he agree though that it is more problematic for people who live in tower blocks, where the energy supply is collectively controlled by the landlord who might not have any incentive to switch to another supplier?

John Penrose: The right hon. Gentleman is exactly right. One of the things that may be improved by the roll-out of smart meters, which we heard about earlier, is those collective bills, which would be broken down. Many energy suppliers and others in the industry are concerned that too many hopes may be being invested in smart meters and they may not necessarily produce a lasting uplift in customer engagement and interest—they will start off as an interesting new gadget in the corner of the room, but after a few weeks or months that interest may die away. We will have to wait and see, but he is right that there is an opportunity, at the very least.

In the spirit of trying to make switching simpler and less scary, firms such as Make It Cheaper, Flipper, OVO and Money Saving Expert provide end-to-end services that do the donkey work for us, handling everything from finding a better deal to organising the switch itself. They appeal to those of us who currently think that even the most convenient price comparison sites take too much of our valuable time.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the problem with the big six and other generators, such as Veolia, is that they are not straightforward and honest with their customers and stakeholders? Until they are straightforward and honest, there will be disquiet about their conduct.

John Penrose: That is one of the underlying concerns about the way that this industry operates. People are not necessarily asked at the moment they are switched to the default tariff, so when they notice that they have been—if they notice—they feel that they are being ripped off, because those default tariffs are so much higher. That leads to distrust of the suppliers, and that is one of the things corroding the underlying trust in the industry as a whole. It is incredibly dangerous. I think some forward-thinking people in the industry understand that and the brand damage that is being done, not just to individual firms but to the sector as a whole. Trust is slow to gain and easy to lose. My hon. Friend has a background in marketing and consumer business, so I am sure that he understands what I mean.

Rolling out the end-to-end services that I mentioned, which are still in their infancy, should persuade a new group of customers who currently do not switch at all to do so, extending the number of people in that stubborn two thirds of the customer base who do not switch, or do so very rarely.

These changes, taken together, are essential steps to solving the underlying fundamental problems that make the energy market such a rip-off. If the Government, the regulator—Ofgem—and perhaps even enlightened energy firms themselves are willing to take those steps, abuses and consumer detriment will start to fall and customers will finally be in the driving seat, as we already are and expect to be for everything else, from toothpaste and coffee to cornflakes and soap.

But how long will this take to fix? How quickly will the rip-off stop? Even then, will there still be stubborn pockets of problems left over here and there? Given that fully two thirds of all customers are on these rip-off tariffs and that proportion has been glacially slow to change, there is an awfully long way still to go. Even under the most optimistic scenarios, an unacceptably large number of households will still be being ripped off for too many years yet. So we need a stopgap—a temporary solution—while all those other changes to make switching easier and less scary start to take effect.

The answer is a relative price cap—a maximum mark-up between each energy firm's best deal and its default tariff. If someone forgot to switch to a new deal when their existing one came to an end, they would not be ripped off too badly, but people would still be able to save plenty of money when they got round to switching again, so it would always still be worth their while to become engaged and take that additional action, should they be so minded.

Under these proposals, energy firms would still be able to compete on price—they could still decide whether they wanted to be the Aldi or Lidl of the industry, or the Waitrose or Marks and Spencer—and could still have as many tariffs as they wanted, so there would be plenty of customer choice. If someone wanted a green energy tariff, that would be fine. If someone did not like computers or wanted to do it the old-fashioned way with offline paper and an ink deal, that would be no problem.

I am delighted to confirm today that the idea of a relative cap is supported by three of the largest challenger brands—OVO, Utility Warehouse and Octopus Energy, which cover hundreds of thousands of customers between them—and I hope to persuade others to join the cause in due course.

Crucially, a relative cap is a lot better than a normal price cap. A relative cap would mean that each energy firm could still adjust its prices whenever the wholesale price of gas or electricity went up or down, but a normal cap would mean that Ofgem had to approve any changes, which inevitably would be slower and create work for lawyers and lobbyists. A relative cap would also mean that energy firms still had plenty of incentives to innovate and find new ways to please particular groups of customers however they wanted, without needing Ofgem's approval first.

Lobbyists and lawyers will hate a relative cap, because there will be much less lobbying and lawyering to do. Putting customers in the driver's seat would mean fewer fat fees and fat lunches. If customers could switch their supplier as easily as changing their brand of cornflakes or soap, we politicians, and the bureaucrats and regulators, would rightly matter a lot less in this area. Because of the extra clarity and simplicity, a relative cap would mean that we could deregulate, too, by striking out reams of regulations, red tape and guidelines that complicate the market and stop energy firms thinking about their customers first and foremost and make them focus on their regulators, lawyers and compliance directors instead. A relative cap would reduce red tape rather than add to it.

But the people who would hate a relative cap the most are the big six, because it would force them to treat us, their consumers, fairly, to reward loyalty rather than exploit it and to fight hard to keep long-standing customers

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rather than take us for granted. In other words, it would force the industry to be a normal industry with normal firms where the customer, not the regulator or politicians, is king.

I know that both Ministers and regulators understand this problem. They have spoken to me and many others in this House about it, and both the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Prime Minister have been trenchant in criticising the sector for not delivering an economy that works for everyone, so I hope that they will accept the thrust of this motion.

The time for action has come. We simply cannot argue, as others have tried to, that even though fully two thirds of the country is being ripped off, we are not going to help or protect those victims because it is their own silly fault if they are not savvy enough to switch. Yes, we need to make switching easier and safer so that, eventually, most of us do it most of the time. That is clearly the right long-term answer. But I hope that Ministers accept that, until that glorious day, we cannot simply sit back and allow consumers to be harmed on this scale for this long and do nothing. We need to do more.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is further to a point of order I raised a couple of hours ago with Mr Speaker about a prime ministerial statement on the Scottish constitution that he pointed out was hypothetical at that time. He said that if such a statement were made, he would entertain a statement from the Dispatch Box by the Prime Minister. That statement has now been made by the Prime Minister, and it has been interpreted as an attempt to bounce the Scottish Parliament's vote next Tuesday on a Scottish referendum. She seems to be dictating the timing of any such referendum. These points were put to her at Prime Minister's Question Time yesterday, and she had a full and fair opportunity to give her answer and to be questioned.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you will understand that parliamentary accountability means that if somebody such as the Prime Minister makes a statement about a change of policy, Members of Parliament are prepared to ask questions about it—questions such as, “What happens if the Scottish Parliament is not bounced and votes for a referendum next week? Why does the Prime Minister believe that the timing is not right when this House is going to be asked in 18 months' time to take or leave a deal with Europe?” Fundamentally, there is arrogance in saying to people in Scotland that they shall not have the right to an act of self-determination or saying to this Parliament that we do not have the right to examination.

Madam Deputy Speaker, have you had a request from the Prime Minister to come to the Dispatch Box and go for parliamentary accountability, or does she feel that Scotland is some sort of county as opposed to the country that it actually is?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that contribution, which was not a point of order. I was here when he made his previous point of order—the Speaker was in the Chair—and I heard the response to it. I have been in the

Chamber the whole time, so I have not heard any statement made by the Prime Minister, but the right hon. Gentleman has successfully put all his questions and concerns on the record.

1.20 pm

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose); it is an honour to follow his speech. He set out the arguments incredibly well. He is passionate and knowledgeable, and his points about the energy market were incredibly measured. I pay tribute to him, my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing this important debate. The issue affects all our constituents—millions of people up and down the country—and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to the debate.

The excellent opening address of the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare made it very clear that the energy market is not working in the best interests of customers. That is not to say that there is any collusion whatever between the energy companies—far from it. Ofgem told us on the Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy that the major energy companies have quite different price strategies; there can be a difference of about £140 a year between what the major energy suppliers charge dual fuel customers. In addition, as the hon. Gentleman said, there have been welcome new entrants to the energy market, which have disrupted, in a very positive way, the energy oligopoly that has been in place for far too long. There are more innovative companies offering better choice, service, and value to the energy customer. Ten years ago, the big six companies dominated the entire market, with a 100% market share. Last year, that had moved to 85%, which is great. That is positive news. New entrants are taking market share and offering quite competitive fixed-term deals.

I said that there was no evidence of collusion between energy companies, but there are marked similarities between the major energy companies' business models, and they do not act in the best interests of customers; in fact, as the hon. Gentleman said, they actually punish customer loyalty. Their business models are predicated on a sizeable proportion, if not the majority, of their customer base being, and continuing indefinitely, on their standard variable tariff. Looking at the big six companies, 74% of British Gas customers are on its SVT; for EDF, it is 56%; for E.ON, 73%; for npower, 59%; and for ScottishPower, 50%; and an astonishing 91% of SSE's customer base is on the SVT.

SVTs are, in the main, the most expensive of all the energy tariffs available, yet almost half of all customers have been with the same supplier for five years or more, and 44% of customers have never changed tariff. It is almost guaranteed that those households are overpaying for their energy. The Competition and Markets Authority estimates that, due to a lack of competition in the market, collectively customers are overpaying for their energy to the tune of £1.4 billion. Despite all that, and the very clear evidence that the market is not working in the interests of customers, energy companies continue to penalise customers for their loyalty. The longer a person is with a company, the more they are likely to pay. In a modern, customer services-oriented economy, what other market could possibly say that?

When npower raised its prices by 14% last month, Ofgem stated to the Select Committee quite categorically that it did not see a case for such a significant rise. Ofgem's chief executive told our Committee that wholesale costs had risen by about 15% in the past year. However, the overall cost of energy was marginally below what it had been three years ago.

Mr Charles Walker: I made this same point to my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose): the big six and Veolia behave in this way because there is a culture of arrogance and entitlement. That is the problem, and we—or, more to the point, the companies—need to address that culture.

Mr Wright: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. A market has to be dynamic. Companies should be nervous about customers moving away, but customers are not doing that. As I said, these companies' business models are entirely predicated on the fact that people will, for a variety of reasons, stay on the expensive tariff; because of that, though companies may provide loss-leading deals for new customers, they scoff at customer loyalty. This market is not working in anybody's interests. It is not dynamic, efficient or effective, and ultimately it is not benefiting customers.

Mr Walker: The problem is not just the way that organisations such as Veolia and the big six treat their customers; it is the way that they treat their regulators and this place—elected representatives.

Mr Wright: This is not just about price and cost; it is about customer service, and what teeth the regulator has—and, ultimately, the Government provide—to ensure a dynamic energy market.

It is true that wholesale costs went up by about 15% last year, and obviously the wholesale cost of energy is ultimately a big part of the energy bill that goes to the customer, but the cost of energy is marginally lower than it was three years ago. Companies hedge their risks when it comes to purchasing energy, which should flatten any price spikes that they experience when buying their energy on the global market. That means that retail prices to customers might not fall as quickly and as sharply when wholesale prices fall, but conversely, it certainly should stop big price hikes when wholesale prices rise, and we have seen no evidence whatsoever of that.

Last month, in announcing its big price rise—the biggest for many years—npower stated on its website:

“over the past few years, the cost of supplying energy to your home has increased, as well as the amount we need to pay towards government schemes.”

This is slightly unusual for me, but allow me robustly to defend the Government. The phrases that npower and other companies have used about the cost of Government schemes are simply wrong. The Committee on Climate Change today published its analysis of energy prices and household costs, which showed that 9% of the average dual fuel bill for domestic customers is accounted for by the cost of moving towards a UK-based low-carbon electricity supply and support for energy efficiency home improvements. The notion that energy companies can justify price increases through Government action or policies is simply disingenuous.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is worth everybody reading that report from the Committee on Climate Change. Does he accept that part of that 9% of the bill goes on helping people—sometimes the poorest in our communities—to reduce their household bill by introducing energy efficiency measures? It is a worthwhile 9% investment.

Mr Wright: Absolutely, and as my right hon. Friend, who has done fantastic work on this, knows all too well, energy efficiency measures are a key plank of ensuring our competitiveness, tackling fuel poverty and addressing our decarbonisation targets. Everybody wins when energy efficiency measures are prioritised.

Mr George Howarth: My hon. Friend is making a very good case. Does he agree that the energy efficiency measures introduced in tower blocks, and sometimes in low-rise properties, can be complicated to use, and if they are not used properly, they can be more expensive to the consumer? I have had two examples in my constituency over the past few years in which people have ended up paying more for a lower standard of heating. Does he think that there is a case for the Government looking at issuing guidance to local authorities and registered social landlords about how to install these systems and inform tenants about how they are supposed to be used?

Mr Wright: My right hon. Friend makes a really powerful point. I was in the Chamber when he made an intervention about switching suppliers and noted that often people in tower blocks are not able to do that. He makes a powerful case and vividly illustrates that the market is not working in the interests of consumers, who might often be in low-waged and vulnerable households. The Government and regulator need to take steps to make sure that the market works.

Ofgem told us that energy companies have increased their prices largely because they have not been successful in controlling their own costs. Sufficient and efficient companies have been able to reduce and absorb cost increases, and have therefore passed on those benefits to the customers by eliminating any risk of price increases. Others have not done so and, due to the nature of their business model, which I explained earlier, feel that they do not have to consider customers because customers simply will not switch and will continue to stay on the most expensive tariff. Customers are literally paying the price for the failure of energy companies to manage their businesses and control their costs. I said to the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) that I would mention that this is about not just costs, but customer service and a lack of trust in energy companies. There is a huge number of examples. I imagine that every hon. Member has cases regarding this in their inbox.

Citizens Advice told the Committee that companies are getting the very basics wrong with late, missing and inaccurate bills. When they get things wrong, they are failing to provide customers with redress. The market is simply not working. So what is the solution? The current policy response seems to be a dual approach—to encourage companies to engage with their customers more efficiently and to communicate widely the benefits that come from switching. Switching should certainly be encouraged, as

[Mr Iain Wright]

customers can make savings of hundreds of pounds if they switch. On the back of the recent price rises from energy companies, I switched the energy supplier for our house and we saved £249. There are big savings to be made. I encourage customers to switch, switch and switch again.

As the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare said, a small proportion of domestic customers do switch, and they switch very often. They are savvy customers who know the market and want to get the best possible deal, but that remains relatively rare. The vast majority of energy customers do not switch for a wide variety of reasons. For example, people may think, “Can I switch? Aren’t I still with the local electricity board?”, “Will it be too complex? I’m frightened of the hassle factor”, or “I’m frightened that my energy supply might be disrupted.” There is a whole range of things, not least, as the hon. Gentleman said, that people lead busy lives, so they often do not consider an essential utility such as energy. It is not sufficient to state that the energy market will be fixed by encouraging more switching and better engagement. There needs to be a fair deal for all energy customers—for the two thirds who do not switch, and not just for those who do so.

The Government often talk a good game when it comes to tackling energy prices. When it was revealed in the autumn that the energy companies were making higher profits than reported, the Secretary of State hauled those companies into his Department for an explanation, but nothing materialised. When npower raises its prices last month, a spokesman for the Prime Minister said:

“We are concerned by Npower’s planned increases—we are committed to getting the best for households. Suppliers are protected from recent fluctuations in wholesale energy prices which are set two years in advance so we expect them to treat customers fairly and clearly where markets are not working we are prepared to act.”

Only this week, in answer to my question during business, energy and industrial strategy questions, the Secretary of State said that “time is up” for those energy companies. But no action has been taken. Customers will have to endure in the next days, weeks and possibly months high prices rises with no action taken whatever. The regulator says the price rises are not justified, No. 10 says that it is concerned, and the Department has had energy companies hauled in, but nothing has been done. This does not seem to reflect the urgency that should be given to the issue. The key point that I would like to be made in this debate is the Minister saying how the Government are going act—and act now—to ensure that customers get a better deal.

The hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare has an important policy response suggestion when it comes to a restricted price cap, and this could be an important means of providing customers with some respite. He mentioned a number of energy companies that have put forward the idea, and there are some quite striking quotes from the people who run those companies. Stephen Fitzpatrick, chief executive of Ovo Energy, said that the energy market was failing because companies were

“free to charge whatever they think they can get away with, at the expense of disengaged or confused customers.”

He also said:

“The time has come for the Government to step in and take bold action to protect consumers’ interests.”

Greg Jackson, chief executive of Octopus Energy, which has about 80,000 customers, said:

“Energy customers are being robbed in broad daylight, and it’s time for decisive action to end the misery for millions.”

Will the Government look favourably on the hon. Gentleman’s point about a price cap? It is very clear that, at a time of crippling price rises from companies seemingly indifferent to the plight of customers, there needs to be a fundamental change to ensure that the market works for all. In the Minister’s response to the debate, he must set out the detailed steps he will take immediately and in the longer term to act in the interests of customers, and set out the timetable. The time for strong words, for hauling the companies into the Department, and for Green Papers and future legislation is over. If the regulator says that there is no justification for price increases and the Prime Minister is saying that action needs to happen, why can we not have action now? Customers are facing price rises now. We should not have to wait for a Green Paper or legislation in the months to come. We need to act immediately. On that basis, what are the Government going to do now?

1.36 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on securing the debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee.

I will pick up where my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) left off regarding the Government. The Conservative party has changed its leader and, in the process, it seems to have changed some of its policies, thinking that we would not notice. To be honest, it is just not good enough. Many hon. Members have campaigned hard on energy pricing. In response to Labour’s campaigning on energy prices, the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, said that his Government would legislate to ensure that customers received the “lowest possible tariffs”. The current Prime Minister has refused to honour that pledge, and I do not understand why, especially after she stood on the steps of No. 10 promising to look after vulnerable people. That must include people who suffer from fuel poverty including older people, people who have English as a second language and those whom my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool says cannot switch easily. They are vulnerable people who are not being protected by the Government.

The Government are proving just to be all talk on this important issue, which is a real shame. They must act to stop the jump in energy prices, or they could adopt one of Labour’s policies—they are used to adopting our policies—and renationalise the energy companies. They could listen to the Mayor of London, who has some innovative ideas on providing energy to people in London. The price hike is a bitter blow to millions of families that will add more than £100 to their typical bill. When people are struggling to make ends meet, this is just not good enough. This is one of the largest ever increases we have seen, and it is simply unacceptable.

The recent Fuel Poverty Awareness day brought home the reality of the fuel poverty situation across the country. Families are facing the agonising decision of whether to

heat or eat, and my constituency in Brent has seen a rise in food banks as a result. Last year, the first ever fuel bank opened in my constituency in order to help residents, especially those on prepayment meters, to get through the winter and difficult times. The food banks came to the conclusion that a fuel bank was necessary as people were approaching them to ask only for food in tins—food that can be eaten cold—because they did not have the money on their meter to heat up or cook food. Lots of people were just surviving on baked beans, for instance. More should and must be done.

I have been campaigning on energy prices for many years because my constituents have struggled with their energy bills, and more and more have come to my surgery with problems. The hardest hit are those on prepayment meters; the House of Commons Library produced figures showing that prepayment customers pay around 15% more on their gas bills than direct debit customers.

So I launched a prepayment meter campaign, and I am really pleased that lots of Members—on both sides of the House, I must say—participated in it. I called on the Government to ensure that fair tariffs were made available for all. Following the campaign, the Competition and Markets Authority recommended a cap on prepayment meters. That was a significant victory, and I was really pleased, but although the cap will reduce the cost for prepayment customers, it will not reduce it by enough—only by about £80. However, the price penalty on prepayment customers can be as much as £320, so a lot more still needs to be done.

One in five families is being hit by prepayment penalties, and they are often the “just about managing” families. As I say, these are the people the Prime Minister often talks about—the very people the Conservative party public relations machine goes into overdrive about, saying that the Conservative party represents them. If it does represent them, the Government would surely do something about this issue, because these people’s inability to heat their homes means they live in damp homes, and it is reckoned that cold-related ill health costs the NHS around £1.36 billion each year. If we want to help the national health service and “just about managing” families, tackling this issue is one step that can be taken very quickly—if there is the will on the Government Benches.

Fuel poverty is a massive problem. It affects over 4 million UK households. In my constituency, one in eight households is classified as fuel-poor, which is higher than the national average of one in 10. The Labour party will continue to work towards ending fuel poverty. When in government, we will put energy efficiency back on the agenda. Struggling families need more than warm words from the Government—they need warm homes.

1.42 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). I congratulate her on the work she has done serving communities and families that are over-reliant on prepayment meters, and it is a welcome change that they will get some help in the months ahead. I would also say that I have a number of people living in the private rented sector in my constituency—I am sure the proportion is far higher in her constituency. It is a big

problem for tenants when landlords do not do enough to make sure that the homes they rent out—they often get housing benefit from the state for doing that—are not decent homes with proper energy-efficiency measures. I know that my hon. Friend will carry on working on behalf of her constituents and people elsewhere.

I would like to thank the co-sponsors of the debate, the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who helped to secure the support of 50 other hon. and right hon. Members to obtain this important debate.

My thanks also go to the Backbench Business Committee—Parliament’s own “Dragons’ Den”—for agreeing to our application. It was only five minutes before we went in that I realised the meeting was going to be broadcast, so I had to get my act together quickly, but we were clearly successful, and we secured this debate for today.

It is well known to family and friends that I love the movies. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Thank you. It is still on my bucket list to be an extra in one—I just put that out there. One of my favourite comedies is “Groundhog Day”, in which the character played by Bill Murray has to replay a single day until he sees the error of his ways. For me, today’s debate feels like “Groundhog Day” because we are reliving the same arguments about our uncompetitive energy market, companies’ poor customer service and ripping-off of customers on standard variable tariffs—points I have made for the past six years. The Ministers keep changing, but I am still here, and I hope that the Minister today, like Bill Murray in the film, will break this spell, because, not for the first time, the headlines have, as hon. Members have mentioned, been full of the eye-watering price increases made recently by four of the big six energy companies—price hikes that are completely unjustified.

However, in many respects, that is not the principal reason for this debate. We sought the debate to address the fact that the energy market is not working; it is failing Britain’s consumers in almost every respect. It does not promote effective competition. The regional giants created after privatisation remain the dominant players in their home regions 30 years later. We talk about the big six, but for many regions, it is the big one.

The energy market also does not promote transparency. In the period following the Thatcher privatisation of British Gas in 1986 and of the regional electricity boards in 1989, there was a succession of mergers and takeovers. That led to companies being, at one and the same time, energy retailers and power generators. Today, the generation and retail arms of these companies remain within pretty much the same corporate structures. One consequence of that is a complete lack of transparency over the price at which these companies sell energy to themselves before retailing to the public. The reforms Labour proposed in 2015 would have resolved that.

The energy market does not promote consumer confidence. The issue is not whether, superficially, one company offers a fixed-price deal for £150 less than another; it is why 88% of consumers still refuse to switch from one supplier to another. The evidence from the CMA survey of 7,000 consumers was clear: 56% had never switched supplier, or did not recall ever switching, and 72% had never switched tariff with an existing supplier. This market is suffering a long-term

[Caroline Flint]

crisis of consumer confidence. While a minority of customers shop around, the vast majority seem to want little or nothing to do with the energy companies.

That is not a sign of contentment—of millions of satisfied customers—but quite the opposite. The CMA found that the number of recorded customer complaints rose sixfold from 2008 to 2014. Ofgem's own research between 2014 and 2016, which was published in September 2016, found that the proportion of domestic complainants who were very dissatisfied with how their complaint was handled increased significantly over that two-year period. The most recent figures showed that 67% of npower customers and 64% of Scottish Power customers were very dissatisfied. Even the medium-sized and smaller companies were not immune—we cannot let them off the hook. First Utility performed worst, with 63% of customers very dissatisfied. The figure for Utility Warehouse was 53%, and for OVO, it was 49%.

The Government preside over a domestic energy market that is not competitive, lacks transparency and has a hell of a lot of dissatisfied consumers. Those factors alone should ring alarm bells in Whitehall and Westminster, but it is the outcome for consumers that ensures that the Government must act. The secrecy, the dominance by a few uncompetitive companies, and the disillusioned, untrusting customer base, which is largely disengaged, all lead to one certain outcome: a consistent failure of the market to offer fair prices. That should be no surprise to any of us. We have regional monopolies—secret and inefficient—low customer engagement and unresponsive pricing. That is why this debate is so important.

I said the UK energy market does not offer fair prices, so let me illustrate that central criticism. First, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) said, the big six energy giants account for 85% of the market, and they treat their long-standing loyal customers worst, as the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare pointed out. Those customers, without exception, will pay for energy on the most expensive default tariff. The only customers treated worse are those forced to live in a home that has a prepayment meter, either because the landlord requires it or because they have a poor credit or payment history. In 20 years, this group has grown to account for 16% of all households. Even the CMA could not ignore the fact that this group pays a premium of around £80 a year, as well as paying in advance for its energy. I therefore welcome, as I said, the decision to provide some price protection by capping the amount an energy company can charge these customers, but that measure does nothing for the remaining majority of customers who are also being overcharged year after year.

What about the overcharging of the majority of mainstream consumers? Even the CMA could not fully explain this overcharging. Its best estimate was that between 2012 and 2015 the average amount overcharged was some £1.5 billion per year, reaching almost £2 billion per year by 2015. The CMA also found that the revenue from standard variable tariff customers was 11% higher for electricity and 15% higher for gas compared with the average revenue for other customers—and this before any of the current price hikes came into effect. The CMA concluded that in any one year the “detriment”, as it describes it—the amount that is overcharged—was

made up of about £600 million a year in excess profits, and the remainder, about £850 million, was down to “inefficiencies”, whatever they may be. This points to bad management by some very highly paid individuals.

John Penrose: The right hon. Lady is making a very compelling case, as she did with me in the dragons' den pitch for this debate. She is absolutely right about the CMA's figures showing such horrendous levels of customer detriment. Not only that, but the gap between the standard variable price that is being charged and the wholesale price has been getting wider over the past four years, so the situation is bad and getting worse as time goes by.

Caroline Flint: Exactly. We have the historical evidence that month by month people are still paying far too much for their energy bills.

It is absolutely astonishing that this is happening in what is meant to be a competitive market. The overcharging and the excessive profit margin made from standard variable tariff customers clearly provides no encouragement to move those customers on to a better deal. I believe that this is a bankrupt business model. If we are all admitting—even the energy companies have had to face up to this—that people are paying over the odds, then the companies have a business model based on that. If all these customers were miraculously to move to a lower tariff tomorrow, where would the companies be left? The inertia is compounded by a management approach that does not seem to want any form of effective change.

Unfortunately, the more the Government have publicly urged consumers to switch to save, the more the companies are absolved of any responsibility to move customers on to a better deal. A sticky, passive, unengaged customer base appears to suit some of these firms down to the ground. When, back in 2012, EDF automatically moved vulnerable elderly customers on to its cheapest tariff, sadly other suppliers did not follow up with this better practice.

The CMA's final report concluded that to eliminate overcharging, prices would have to fall across the board by an average of 3% per year between now and 2020. It hoped that its measures to promote switching would create more competition in the market and have a downward effect on prices, but it was reluctant to say exactly how successful it expected that to be. The problem that the CMA faces is that the UK has an energy market with unhappy consumers, a dysfunctional pricing mechanism, and companies that are, I am afraid, largely immune to competitive pressures.

Ofgem has reported that some 3.3 million households switched supplier from January to December 2016. This is apparently the highest level of switching for six years, but it equates to less than 12% of households. I worry that we have a two-tier energy market: an active, informed class of consumer who is energy-conscious, internet-savvy, shopping around and managing their accounts online, and a far bigger, less informed, less engaged, less internet-savvy, discontented majority.

Mr Iain Wright: My right hon. Friend is second to none in her knowledge of energy policy. She may be coming on to this, but I would be interested to get her thoughts on policy fixes. Does she think that the regulator

has the powers but is not using them, or that the Government need to give the regulator more powers to help fix this broken market?

Caroline Flint: The regulator already has powers in its back pocket. It can intervene if it thinks that the market is uncompetitive. It can, if necessary, take customers off a company that is failing and allow them to get a better deal elsewhere from other suppliers. However, we do need Government to take responsibility. Whether we have the relative price cap that the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare proposes or my suggestion of a protected tariff—if not permanent, then temporary—to fix this market, it is clear that more reform is needed. I wish that the regulator would use its powers; it has been very slow to do so, although it has speeded up in recent years. There is more it could do, but there is more that Government could provide it with to do a better job.

One of the CMA's proposals is that data on customers should be shared so that other energy suppliers can send their offers to customers. The problem is that people will be bombarded with leaflets and emails from operators in a sector in which their trust is already so low that they may not put any more in this marketing mechanism. These are the very people—immune to direct mail, annoyed by calls from would-be energy suppliers, and mistrustful of the whole industry—who are not being helped by any of the measures put forward since the CMA report.

The CMA believes that by encouraging switching and a shared database for companies to market new tariffs to each other's customers, price competition can be made to work. However, I am afraid that this shared database seems to be a new label for an old solution. We have had six years of trying to bring a consumer benefit by switching—six years of abject failure. I must therefore ask the Minister whether it is realistic to assume that 28 million households will be able to reduce their average bills by 3% a year, as the CMA suggests, for each year between 2017 and 2020. The CMA believes that if it succeeds in its aim, this steady price fall would eliminate the overcharging—the detriment—but even if it did, it would not repay one penny of the money already unfairly taken from consumers. I see no mechanism in the CMA's prescription that can achieve even the objective it has set. Adding customers who have remained on a standard default tariff for three years to a huge marketing database for other companies to prey on will not, in itself, make this market more competitive.

In March, Ofgem published the information that January's cheapest available tariff was 22% cheaper than the average customer's bill, but did not identify how long that offer lasted or how many customers benefited. However, let us follow its logic. What if that tariff was widely available? What if the 12% of switchers—3.3 million consumers—all switched to this new best value tariff, and what if those 12% of customers all got a saving of 20% on their bills? This change alone might notionally cut average bills by 2%—almost the 3% the CMA hoped to achieve through its measures—but it would not reduce the detriment by one penny for the 88% who do not switch. The penalty incurred by the vast majority would remain.

Also among the CMA's recommendations is that price comparison websites should no longer have to display every deal on the market, so consumers may

only see the deals that give the website a commission. The majority of customers who remain resistant to the lures of the marketeers will still see no gain. Those customers—some 20 million who pay the default standard variable tariffs and endure their prices going up and down as the energy provider chooses—are left at the mercy of their supplier, which the CMA has already identified as consistently overcharging them. They certainly cannot rely on wholesale prices to save them, because there is no obligation to pass on falls in wholesale prices to consumers—not even in part. Ofgem reported that wholesale gas prices fell by 44% between 2012 and 2016, yet consumers saw their energy bills rise by 7% over the same period. Such a perverse result could happen only in a dysfunctional market. Where do consumers turn to get fairness? The only avenue for the majority of consumers is the Government, who are the one agency with the powers to change the game at a stroke. How long will the public have to wait before the Government finally act as a consumers' champion?

In 2011, when I became shadow Energy and Climate Change Secretary, I advised the Government that energy bills were soaring, but they did nothing. In October 2011, the then Prime Minister convened an energy summit and proposed to write to millions of consumers about switching, but that did not work. In November 2013, Mr Cameron tried a different approach: “get rid of all the green crap,” a senior source reported him as saying.

As has been touched on in this debate, the big six always like to divert discussion of bills on to green levies, even though investment in renewable energy and low carbon energy is exerting a downward pressure on wholesale prices. It is ironic that domestic consumption of energy, in kilowatt hours, has gone down, but we are paying more in our bills. The former Prime Minister said, “get rid of the green crap”, and he did so. The Government shortly afterwards reduced some of the environmental obligations and network charges and cut bills by between £39 and £50. Unfortunately, that year energy bills rose by an average of £120, so that did not work.

Mr Cameron always ridiculed Labour's energy price freeze, which was a proposal to cap energy prices for 20 months while the energy market was reformed. Instead, in 2014 he announced the CMA investigation. Its initial findings the following year and its final report in June 2016 entirely vindicated Labour's concern about unfair energy prices. We now have it on the record from one of the Government's regulators: Britain's consumers were ripped off year after year for a period of four years—that we know of. About that there is no dispute. It is an £8 billion scandal, and every month the financial punishment for customers grows.

So what do we want? My plea to the Government is simple. Recognise the scale of the problem. Recognise that switching campaigns, which have now become a gimmick, can only scratch the surface. They will never get to the heart of the problem. Recognise that the industry needs reform, and that until it is reformed, the Government need to introduce price protection for consumers.

I believe that that protection should take the form of a protected tariff, and I first argued for such a tariff after the general election in 2015. Consumers need nothing less than some sort of regulated maximum charge that companies can levy, which is based on

[Caroline Flint]

wholesale prices, network costs and an acceptable level of profit. I do not believe that that can be left to the companies. Any voluntary measure is welcome, but the approach has been too piecemeal. We need the Government to act by introducing a protected tariff, which is set by Ofgem. We know that Ofgem is capable of that calculation, because it has just done a similar exercise for 3.5 million prepayment meter customers.

Am I asking for something outlandish? No. Northern Ireland still has price regulation, and a majority of countries in the European Union still have price controls of one sort or another. In the matter of price controls, we are not thwarted by the European Union. We cannot blame either the EU or Brexit for the Government's failure to address this injustice. The problem lands on the doorsteps of No. 10 and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The Government have the power and the means to end the unfairness in our energy market, or at least to offer a temporary respite, as they have done for prepayment customers, until more substantial reforms can be enacted.

In November the Secretary of State said:

"Customers who are loyal to their energy supplier should be treated well, not taken for a ride. It's high time the big companies recognised this. I have made clear that this cannot go on and they must treat customers properly or be made to do so."

I say to the Minister: now is the time. This problem is not going away, and I urge the Government to listen to the voices of Members of all parties who believe that the current energy market does not serve the British people well. Action is long overdue.

2.4 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), if a little daunting to speak after such a tour de force. As has been said, she is second to none in her knowledge of this issue. I congratulate the hon. Members for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on their support in securing this timely debate, which comes in the wake of the most recent excessive price rises by the big six energy companies. It is good to join this cross-party platform to urge the Government to do something to stop those companies ripping their customers off. The companies have been getting away with it for far too long.

My right hon. Friend has campaigned for fair energy prices for the past six years. If dogged determination were enough to secure victory, it would have paid off long before now, but very little has changed during that time, as we have heard. Despite talking big on energy reform, the Government have failed to act where the market is failing. They quietly dropped a promise made by the Prime Minister in 2012 to force companies to switch customers to their lowest tariff; and, despite the rhetoric about cutting the green crap, they failed to ensure that the reductions they made to environmental and other obligations resulted in lower energy bills.

Ofgem's capping of prices for customers on prepayment meters on the recommendation of the Competition and Markets Authority is welcome, but I agree that we need action for all standard variable tariff customers. In

recent weeks, npower and SSE have raised their electricity prices by an eye-watering 15%, and another three of the large companies have increased their bills by nearly 10% on dual fuel standard variable tariffs. That is despite Ofgem saying that it saw no reason for price increases, given that wholesale prices are only just starting to increase from a low base. It has not gone unnoticed that many of those rises have been piled on to electricity, no doubt to ensure that as people start turning their heating off, bills remain high over the summer.

As has been said, it is grotesquely unfair that the current structure penalises the most long-standing and loyal customers, as well as the most vulnerable. The difference between a company's cheapest tariffs and its SVTs is almost £200, and customers on SVTs pay 11% more for their electricity and 15% more for their gas than customers on other tariffs. In 2015, consumers overpaid by a staggering £2 billion; *The Observer* estimated that that was the equivalent of a halfpenny rise on income tax. With 70% of big six customers on SVTs, these tariffs are clearly helping to support record profits; the profits of the big six increased tenfold between 2007 and 2013.

As we have heard, rising energy prices are putting a real strain on household budgets and hitting the poorest households, which are far less likely than others to switch, particularly hard. Energy bills now account for 10% of spending in the poorest households, compared with just 5.5% in 2004. Citizens Advice estimates that 2 million low-income families pay £141 extra every year.

I want to talk for a moment about my own constituency and the city of Bristol, which I am proud to represent. We have some of the worst incidence of fuel poverty in England. People always think of Bristol as an affluent place, but, as I am sure the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare will confirm, the fact that parts of a city or town are thriving does not mean that people in other parts of it are not living in poverty. More than 25,000 people in Bristol—13% of the city—are living in fuel poverty, against a national average of just under 10%. Variations within the city are particularly stark. In some neighbourhoods, nearly a quarter—more than 23%—of households are in fuel poverty. Those areas are within a mile of neighbourhoods in which the figure is only 5%. Local food banks increasingly have to help people who self-disconnect or who ration their energy use, as well as their food consumption, to save money. People too often have to choose between heating and eating—fuel or food—as we have heard.

For those who suffer from long-term health conditions, living in a cold home can cause considerable suffering and even early death. Last year in my constituency there were 30 excess winter deaths, of which around a third are estimated to have been caused simply by cold homes. Over the years, I have heard some shocking stories from constituents. I was contacted a while ago by one woman whose husband was extremely ill. Their cold home was not only making her husband's health condition worse, but denying them the most basic of comforts. In her email to me, she said,

"all we would like is to be warm in our home".

I do not think that that is too much for anyone to ask in this day and age.

Other MPs will have in their localities the new breed of municipal energy providers, which provide a very different offer from that of the big six, with fairer rates and cleaner energy. Bristol Energy was set up fairly recently by Bristol City Council. Bristol Energy is a national company, so anyone can switch to it, but there is a special tariff for people with a Bristol postcode. It was set up to help local people, as well as people from outside the city who want to join in, to pay less for their energy and to provide a new way to raise funds for the city, as all the profits will be reinvested back into Bristol. Its standard variable tariff is significantly cheaper than that of the big six—on average, £105 cheaper—and it keeps its fixed deals fair, too. It is currently trialling a warm homes plus tariff, to bring households in Bristol out of fuel poverty. This non-profit-making tariff is only available by referral, and Bristol Energy is working with the citizens advice bureau, the council and Bristol's Centre for Sustainable Energy on those referrals. It is looking for 1,000 people to put on this tariff to start with, limited to a year, to help lift them out of fuel poverty. As I have said, the profits will be invested back into the city. In the longer term, we want to be really ambitious in tying energy in with the waste sector. I was told on one visit to a waste plant on the outskirts of the city that it is reckoned that Bristol's waste alone could generate enough energy to heat 250,000 homes. That has absolutely to be the way forward: a local solution to a local problem.

However welcome new entrants such as Bristol Energy are to the energy market, they seem to have had little impact so far in putting pressure on the big six to reduce their prices. Despite better practices by some companies, pushing people to switch or telling them that that option is available is clearly not enough. Ann Robinson, an independent energy expert, said in *The Observer* at the weekend:

“Although I believe in competition—because when it works it can result in fairer prices—we have to face the fact that not everyone can and will engage in the market.”

A spokesman for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has said that Ministers are ready to act when the market is failing. Those words are encouraging, but it is absolutely clear that the market is failing for the majority of people. I am not sure when the Department will decide that it is time to act, but if it had not been made before this debate, the case has certainly been made very powerfully on both sides of the Chamber today that the market is failing and it is now time for the Government to act.

Just 15% of households are regular switchers, and 66% of the remainder are customers who have never switched supplier—the so-called sticky 66%. As proposed in the motion, we need an approach that keeps open the option of full switching, but ensures the sticky customer does not become disadvantaged by remaining on an uncompetitive tariff. I very much support the proposals from Labour's Front-Bench team and my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley for tariff reform, which is fairer and much more transparent.

Much greater transparency—as a first step, the inclusion of a breakdown of costs behind each of the tariffs, as well as the wholesale energy and transmission costs, and add-ons, including green energy—with an improved annual renewal notice along the lines of motor insurance, would encourage more switching, but I believe we need

to go further still. We also need some kind of price controls for those on standard variable tariffs, and I urge the Government to pick up my right hon. Friend's proposals for capping these tariffs.

My concern is that if we wait for the completion of the consultation on the Green Paper on when the Government should intervene in markets—it is due in the spring—it will be too late to affect energy prices next winter, and people will again suffer from having to pay above the odds with extortionate energy bills. *The Observer* said in an editorial:

“The government must reinstate price regulation until there is convincing evidence that market forces will provide value for consumers rather than unfairly enriching corporate profits.”

Consumers have been exploited for too long, and it is now time for the Government to act.

2.13 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to be a co-sponsor of this debate, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and, indeed, the Backbench Business Committee, for enabling it to take place. As has been pointed out—this is one of the disadvantages of speaking so far down the list—this debate is long overdue. Ultimately, it is a debate about how we can empower consumers, as they too often face injustice in relation to energy prices.

We know that average annual domestic gas and electricity bills in Scotland increased by up to 114% and 50% respectively between 2004 and 2015, but the price that consumers pay varies, depending on their method of payment, and the consumer does not always have control over their method of payment. On average, electricity and gas consumers across Scotland using standard credit and prepayment meters face bills that are approximately 10% higher than for those able to use direct debit. The cost of a unit of gas is similar across Scotland and the rest of the British energy market for domestic consumers, but the unit price of electricity differs considerably within Scotland. Consumers in the north of Scotland pay on average between 8% and 9% more per kilowatt-hour of electricity, depending on payment type, than in the rest of Britain.

The big six energy companies supply gas and electricity to over 50 million homes, with a market share of 85% of UK domestic customers. Last year, the Competition and Markets Authority completed a two-year inquiry into the energy market, and the hope is that costs can be driven down by increasing competition between suppliers and helping more customers to switch to better deals. However, as we have heard, there is a problem. The Competition and Markets Authority has found that the “vast majority of people don't switch providers”,

and, even worse, that 70% of all big six customers are on the default standard variable tariff, which means that 16 million homes are paying more for their energy than they should. As the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare pointed out, loyalty is treated as something to be exploited, rather than rewarded. The premium that standard variable tariff consumers pay over those who switch has tended to increase over time. In 2008, it was less than £100 each year, but by mid-2015 it stood at £330, and it currently stands at about £230. In all that time, rates of switching are no higher, so clearly, as the

[Patricia Gibson]

motion sets out, the way to protect consumers cannot be done simply by encouraging them to switch suppliers; much more is required.

Consumers on standard variable tariffs are much more likely to be older, disabled, on low incomes, living in rented accommodation and without internet access. Those on standard variable tariffs did not see their bills fall by much when the cost of providing energy dropped in 2014-15. Such savings as were available were passed on only to consumers who were active switchers. Not all consumers can engage in the switching process, so clearly suppliers need to do more to ensure that these customers are not trapped in poor deals.

The existing market provides scope for households to save money on their energy bills by switching, but a low level of consumer engagement in the market still persists. Indeed, the Competition and Markets Authority found in its investigations that one of the main issues is

“a lack of engagement in the markets on the part of many customers which suppliers are able to exploit by charging high prices.”

Some 34% of domestic energy customers had never considered switching supplier, with 56% saying they did not know if it was possible or did not know if they had done so in the past. In the context of this debate, I want to draw attention to one issue of concern. Switching can take up to 21 days, which is a considerable period. A consumer thinking about switching may be concerned or fear that something will go wrong during that extended period, for which I do not believe there is sufficient justification.

One result is that energy is becoming increasingly unaffordable for consumers. Between 2004 and 2014, average annual domestic gas prices rose by about 125% in real terms. Significantly, consumers who are engaged in the market are typically higher income earners who have access to both a mains gas supply and the internet, so they can carry out comparison shopping much more easily, and they can of course pay by direct debit. This is yet more evidence that the way to protect consumers is not simply to encourage them to switch suppliers.

Energy efficiency measures are important, as we have heard. The Scottish Government have done a lot of work on that, and they are driving down fuel poverty, although it still remains stubbornly high. Ultimately and fundamentally, however, we need effective regulation of the retail energy market, and we need to work collaboratively with energy suppliers to explore ways of helping low-income households with their energy bills. We need a market that works equally well for all energy consumers, regardless of where they are on the income scale.

It will be important to monitor closely the widespread review that Ofgem is currently undertaking of its consumer regulation framework. Given what we have heard today, there must be a case for the safeguard tariff—the limit on the amount prepayment customers are charged—to be expanded to include consumers on the standard variable tariff who are eligible for the warm home discount on a credit meter. It is also important for the Government to set targets for suppliers to reduce significantly by 2020 the number of customers on standard variable tariffs. If suppliers cannot or do not meet these targets, consideration must be given to broadening the

safeguard tariff to protect other standard variable tariff customers. I would very much like the Minister to address these issues today.

Just because consumers, who very often are vulnerable, are not able to negotiate the process of switching does not mean they should be left at the mercy of a market that punishes them for it. Energy is an essential utility and much more must be done to protect those who are currently very poorly served and overcharged. I think we all agree that doing nothing is not an option. I hope the Minister addresses the concerns that I and others have raised today, and reassures the House that he is protecting consumers and putting energy companies on notice that things cannot and must not continue in the same way as they have been.

2.21 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson).

Bradford is a proud city, but it faces its share of challenges. Many in Bradford endure poverty despite being in paid work. In-work poverty is rife. Despite working long hours week-in, week-out, pay-packets simply do not meet the basic necessities. One such basic necessity is how to pay gas and electricity bills when they drop on to the doormat. To my mind, that is what today's debate is all about.

As energy prices soar and wages continue to stagnate, hard-pressed families and those on low incomes are faced with desperate choices. What should they pay first: their rent or their electricity bill? What is more important: their weekly food shop or their gas bill? What is better for their family: a warm home or food on their kitchen table? Without doubt, soaring energy prices touch every single person in this country, but the poorest suffer disproportionately.

What is clear is that the wider energy market is in chaos. For how many hours have coal-fired power stations provided electricity to the grid this winter? Previously, coal provided 12 terawatt hours a year. How many terawatts has coal produced in the last year? Is it not the case that coal stations produce more emissions on lower loads? How will the current capacity market mechanism guarantee new power stations? Is the bid price not too low? The market is failing consumers and failing to secure the nation's energy future.

It is also clear that the energy sector is no longer operating in the interests of our constituents. All the big six energy companies—except British Gas, to its credit—have recently announced price hikes. Competition is supposed to be there to drive down costs and lower prices. The big six enjoy a near monopoly position—a huge 85% market share. When prices are hiked within days of each other, that is strong evidence the market is broken. The Government cannot continue to argue that competition in the energy sector is the key to lower bills. The big six are failing to get ordinary families and hard-pressed individuals on to their cheapest tariff. For 20 million households to be stranded on default tariffs is a scandal. The mantra about helping customers—my constituents—on to the cheapest tariffs is little more than spin. Customers could be paying an additional £230 each year. That is a huge sum when family budgets are under such pressure.

In Bradford, I am fortunate that my local council is working to tackle fuel poverty, but it cannot control the big six energy companies. That is solely within the gift of the Government. In 2015, Bradford Council adopted a fuel poverty framework for action. This, devised in partnership with the respected National Energy Action, undertook a detailed analysis of the scale of fuel poverty in Bradford. The study discovered that although in recent years homes in Bradford have benefited from some 50,000 energy efficiency measures—from loft insulation to new boilers—one in eight households continue to suffer fuel poverty. That remains the case today.

Bradford is a city blessed with a long and rich history, but its historical and industrial past means that a substantial proportion of its housing is very old. Nearly 40% of the city's housing stock was built before 1919, which is considerably above the national average of nearly 25%. A further 21% of the city's housing stock was built between 1919 and 1944. These homes are classified as hard to treat, as they are stone-built or feature irregular constructions. In many other towns and cities throughout the country, a family faced with soaring energy prices might consider improving the energy efficiency of their home—if, of course, they could afford it. In Bradford, however, the prevalence of hard-to-treat homes means energy efficiency schemes are neither quick nor affordable. Measures are complex and expensive. The prospect of a hard-pressed family meeting the expense of a complex scheme is ever more unlikely in light of the Government's policies.

The plight of families is especially desperate in the private rented sector in Bradford. As families have been priced out of the housing market, many have found themselves in rented accommodation that has seen little investment for many years. The number of households in the private rented sector in Bradford has rocketed from 17,500 households in 2001 to nearly 40,000 in 2015. It now accounts for over 18% of the total housing stock.

I recognise that the Government are taking steps to tackle fuel poverty in the private rented sector. Regrettably, the measures announced by the Government lack ambition. The legal minimum requirement in the private rented sector has been set at "E". This represents the average rating for the country's housing stock. An ambitious Government would have set the legal minimum much higher. If the Government had done so, an average family in private rented accommodation could have looked forward to a warmer home and saved hundreds of pounds every year.

The damage wreaked by fuel poverty is not limited to people's finances. A cold home severely damages the health and wellbeing of my constituents. Evidence proves that living in a cold home aggravates a range of health problems, including circulatory conditions, cardiovascular disease and mental health. In extreme circumstances, living in a cold home leads to premature death during the winter months. To my shock, the rate of premature death in Bradford for the period 2010 to 2013 was over 22%. That is 5% higher than for the Yorkshire and Humber region, and for England as a whole. People are literally paying for fuel poverty with their lives.

This situation must not go on. The Government must take action to tackle fuel poverty. The double whammy of soaring energy costs and cuts to energy efficiency schemes is pushing hard-pressed families in Bradford

close to the edge. For many families, the desperate choice is between a warm home and food on the table. That is unacceptable in this day and age.

2.28 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I would like to thank every single hon. Member for their contribution today. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) for bringing the issue of energy prices and the treatment of consumers to the House, via the Backbench Business Committee.

The big six have a lot to answer for. Rewarding long-term and loyal customers with the highest tariffs is simply appalling. Many of these individuals are elderly, vulnerable or disabled, have learning disabilities or mental health problems and can least afford them. When my own grandmother was transferred to hospital in her 90s, we examined the tariff she was paying for. It was about two times higher than what we were paying. Pensioners have a tight budget and may be frail and very elderly. They rely on heating to prevent pneumonia. How can these companies sleep at night?

There has been a great deal of talk about switching, and why we do not do it more. I hope I am not the only person who has been bamboozled by energy tariffs. I have a doctorate, but I find the system absolutely incomprehensible and the tariffs incomparable. I have tried on a number of occasions to compare day rates, night rates and standard daily charges, but without a PhD in mathematics, it is all but impossible. On two occasions I switched rates to save money, and then found that my bill had increased. I cannot help thinking that the system has been made over-complex for people on purpose.

The hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare has suggested a relative energy cap to help those who are currently being mercilessly ripped off. That proposal is apparently supported by a number of competitor brands, and I urge the Minister to consider it. It may be an interim solution, as has been said, but it will save customers—our constituents—money. Our focus should, indeed must, be on them. The hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) mentioned the exorbitant price differential if consumers make the wrong decision, pointing out that the big six often do not act in the interests of customers.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Over the years the House has had many debates about the big six, but is it not time for a proper inquiry into how they actually operate? It seems to me that they are a cartel that fixes prices most of the time, and at the end of the day the hon. Lady's constituents and mine suffer as a result.

Dr Cameron: That is an important point. It has been made clear repeatedly today that many Members feel that there is a monopoly, and that consumers must be put at the heart of energy pricing. The hon. Member for Hartlepool described the difficulties that people have experienced in switching suppliers, and pointed out that, while energy costs have fallen, prices have been hiked. That in itself is an absolute disgrace.

Mention has been made of smart meters, which, although they help individuals to monitor energy usage, appear to place responsibility on consumers, as though

[*Dr Cameron*]

they were using too much, when in fact they are paying too much. Smart meters are not the sole answer, and companies must step up and take responsibility.

My hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil) has asked me to point out that fuel poverty rates in the Western Isles are higher than those in any other local authority area in Scotland. The announcement from SSE that it will increase energy prices by 14.9% is a huge blow to his constituents. What measures will the Government take to address the issues that are being faced exponentially by those in island and rural communities?

The hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) said that “just about managing” families were being most affected, and that the Government were not standing up for their rights. She also rightly drew attention to the impact of fuel poverty. In an excellent speech, the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) discussed the levels of dissatisfaction among customers throughout the United Kingdom, which she said should ring alarm bells for the Government. She emphasised that those who were struggling to pay were paying the most, and that, meanwhile, company profits were increasing. The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) spoke of Bristol Energy’s contribution to fair pricing locally, and the level of local fuel poverty. She was right to highlight her constituency concerns.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) described the situation in Scotland, particularly in rural and northern areas. She said that it could take 21 days to change supplier, which in itself was putting people off—the process is inflated. She called for an extension of the safeguard tariff, and said that the Government should consider the need for reductions in the percentage of consumers on the standard tariff within a set time frame. There are rural areas in my constituency that are still off the grid. Much more needs to be done to support rural communities that have little choice when it comes to costs and types of energy. I urge the Minister to address that, because those communities are among the worst affected by price changes. The hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) spoke of soaring energy prices, and said that the poorest suffered disproportionately.

As for Scottish Government policy, a draft Scottish energy strategy is now open for consultation, and I encourage those who are interested to give their opinions. The Scottish Government remain committed to putting consumers at the heart of their policy, and to their renewables targets. I urge the Minister to act, because we do not need a postcode lottery. Everything that we have heard today makes clear that the energy sector needs reform and needs it now, and that that reform must be made to serve customers rather than itself.

2.35 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): We have had an excellent and powerful debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing it. I know there were a number of problems with the televising of

the pitch for it, but as it turned out the pitch was successful, and the wisdom of the Backbench Business Committee has been borne out by the powerful contributions made today by my hon. Friends the Members for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) and for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), and my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins).

I intend to comment specifically on what Members have said today, but I think we can agree that they all emphasised that the present energy market is broken and no longer doing its best for customers, who, after all, are at the heart of energy generation and supply. We have found ourselves in rather an odd position, in that we have not been discussing—as we frequently do in the Chamber—the plight of a persecuted minority and what we might do about it; instead, we have been discussing the plight of a persecuted majority and what we might do about it. If that does not emphasise the point that Members have been making about the brokenness of the market, I do not know what does.

We have seen eye-watering price increases lately. A number of companies have raised the price of dual fuel by 10%, and there have been double-figure increases in electricity bills from others. The companies justify their increases on the basis of a combination of wholesale prices and the Government’s environmental measures, and even—as we have heard recently—the impact of smart meters. The problem is that we have no easy way of assessing the extent to which those claims are justified. However, as was emphasised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley, we need to lay one canard to rest, and that is the suggestion that price rises are a result of low-carbon levies. They are not. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool, the recent report from the Committee on Climate Change indicated that, overall, only 9% of bills result from Government energy measures. Indeed, not only are those energy measures not a huge part of the overall bill, but they will contribute to decreasing bills in the future by decreasing demand, by increasing energy efficiency, and, in terms of renewable energy, by changing the merit order of energy supply so that eventually the wholesale price of energy can be driven down over a period.

Mr Iain Wright: What does my hon. Friend think about the fact that E.ON UK last week justified its dual fuel price increase by saying:

“It is due mainly”—

we should think about that word—

“to the rise in non-energy parts of the bill such as social and environmental schemes which support renewable energy and help customers use less energy”?

Yet today it has announced big rises in profits, primarily owing to lower costs in conjunction with Government-mandated energy efficiency measures. They want to have their cake and eat it.

Dr Whitehead: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point; they do want to have their cake and eat it. The problem is that we are not sure where the cake is and how we can work out which bits of the cake come from which source, because the whole energy market as it stands is non-transparent. Transparency is central to

being able to judge whether such price rises are justified. The transactions that the energy companies undertake in order to trade, to hedge their trading, and to bring the costs of wholesale into the retail market are almost wholly opaque, and they continue to be so.

In addition, as we have heard this afternoon, the persecuted majority get hit all ways; they are hit by the price rises and hit by paying for the most expensive tariffs in the company roster—and in some cases, up to 90% of the customers of those companies are paying for the most expensive tariffs. So not only should we not speak about standard variable tariff customers as if they are an endangered minority, because they are in fact an endangered majority, but we must stop suggesting that it is somehow their fault that they have not switched and as if they are responsible for not switching. If we look at the history that my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley pointed out, we see a correlation between the areas from which modern energy companies originated and their sticky customer base. In fact, in a number of instances, a large proportion of those sticky customers were inherited when the companies were privatised and have stayed with them ever since. One might think that that shows admirable loyalty to those companies, and that to treat those customers in the way we have heard about this afternoon is absolutely the wrong thing to do.

Such behaviour produces a huge base of customers that is advantageous to energy companies, not to put too fine a point on it. As the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare said, those customers will pay more for less year after year, they will not desert the company as a result, and they can be relied on to be milked to the benefit of the company's finances. That points to the problem with the solution to this issue that the Government and the Competition and Markets Authority have been pursuing, which is sort of to blame those sticky customers for the plight they find themselves in and say, "Well, if only you'd switched, everything would be okay." Indeed, that idea is at the heart of the recent CMA report on the energy market: "Why don't all these sticky customers switch? If they don't, how can we poke and prod them until they do? If we keep prodding and poking them and they still do not switch, we can get other companies in to poke and prod them a bit more and then they might switch." That is not a satisfactory final remedy, given the scale, the nature and the brokenness of the market.

However, we should not therefore be surprised to read in the principles attached to the provisional remedies that the CMA put forward—the principles on which it operated the recent inquiry—the following statement:

"It is through customers shopping around and making choices between the offerings of rival suppliers that the benefits of competition emerge."

That is what it thought it was doing through the inquiry.

The CMA has come up with the idea of putting a cap on tariffs for customers on prepaid meters, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central, who has been instrumental in securing that through her campaigning on the status of those on prepaid meters and the excess sums they were paying. However, although that cap idea is welcome, it does not do very much for the overall issue. We know that those sticky customers are not going to switch in a hurry and that the energy companies know that; we know that there is no evidence

that companies are trembling at the thought of their customers switching and are trimming their rises accordingly. As we have heard this afternoon, the evidence from reports is that switching is a substantial occupation for some, but not for most. Switching figures in total often conceal a churn of switching between companies, often ending back in the same place, and multiple switching by a proactive few, but none by most.

So we have almost a perfect storm in our markets. Prices are spiralling. Ofgem said about recent price rises that it did not

"see any case for significant price increases where suppliers have bought energy well in advance."

Customers were stuck in the middle of that spiral, however, and in most instances were paying out on disadvantageous tariffs, to boot. So, in the customers' interest, we need to get a grip on that problem urgently.

We have heard this afternoon that getting that grip has been promised on a number of occasions. We heard that the Prime Minister suggested that everyone should be put on the lowest tariff. That has disappeared. We heard more recently Ministers saying that companies are in the last-chance saloon and something has to happen, but very little has actually taken place. That is despite the fact that, as Members have mentioned, it is plain that customers have been overcharged for a long period by energy companies, with the CMA itself estimating a sum of almost £2 billion by 2015.

So a regulated price cap within which competition could take place is a good idea. I recognise, however, that a price cap has to be considered within the context of the fact that there will be real pressures on costs. It is true that, on occasions, wholesale markets go up, and the energy companies will have to absorb that through price increases. So a cap that allows that arrangement to take place, but within which work can be done to ensure that competition remains, is a good starting idea, as is the idea that sticky customers should, after a certain period, be taken into protected tariffs, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley suggested, or on to the lowest tariff that a company offers. That is one way of starting to take action in relation to sticky customers.

I believe that there is rather more to the present dysfunction of the energy market than just the question of sticky customers, however. Ofgem said recently that there was not a case for significant price rises when suppliers had bought energy well in advance. Perhaps we need to deconstruct that sentence. It is not clear whether Ofgem was referring to companies buying wisely in advance or a long time in advance. Either way, the injunction is sound. Long-term buying strategies and smart hedging mean that price rises should not be spiking in the way that they all too often do, but we do not know what companies are actually up to when they are buying.

We do not know what is happening as far as energy company trades are concerned. For example, 95% of trades by wholesale energy companies are over the counter and we cannot see what they consist of. We do not know the extent to which energy companies that are vertically integrated effectively trade with themselves, or the extent to which this reflects fair trade in the market in forward trading. Surely we need to open up the market to full transparency, not just day-ahead but right along the curve, so that we know what is going on

[*Dr Whitehead*]

and we can act to prevent the abuses of trading positions that take place to the advantage of companies' resources but to the disadvantage of customers.

John Penrose: I am sure that transparency is a sensible and worthwhile thing to aim for, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that it does not matter terribly much from a consumer's point of view, because consumers do not care whether their supplier has a good hedging strategy or a bad one? That is up to the supplier to deal with and to manage. Some will get it right and some will get it wrong, but if they get it wrong, it should hit their managers' bonuses and their shareholders' returns rather than the price that the consumer eventually pays. We might want to understand this, but we should not seek to use it as a justification for high or low prices. Ultimately we should be tougher on the suppliers than that.

Dr Whitehead: Indeed. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the relationship of the customer to those transactions. However, with vertical integration, those transactions could cause money that should go to the customer to be siphoned off into different areas as a result of those opaque trades, and that is important to the customer in the long term. That is why we need full transparency in all those market trade arrangements.

Caroline Flint: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the vertically integrated nature of these companies. In this dark, dark world of electricity generation and supply, is it not the case that the big six generate energy, sell it to themselves and then sell it on to us? That not only impacts on the fairness of pricing but excludes others, including independent generators and retailers, from coming into the market to put downward pressure on prices.

Dr Whitehead: My right hon. Friend's point is spot on. It demonstrates the need to understand a lot more about how those trades work, who is doing what to whom and, sometimes, who is doing what to themselves. This is a complicated picture, involving trading right up to closure and trading in times of scarcity. There has been a suggestion that traders can pull back on their generation in order to trade when the generation becomes more scarce in order to get more money. The lack of accountability in those companies and the opacity of the system mean that we are badly served in regard to knowing what money goes where and who is benefiting from it, and what is happening to the customer in the end.

We need to open up the market to full transparency but we need to go still further and introduce a pool system of trading, so that all trades into the pool and all trades out of it are conducted transparently and, most importantly, on a level playing field for all suppliers. This works in other European countries—Scandinavia has the Nord Pool, for example—so why can it not work here? That does not mean that companies cannot make money. As Ofgem says, if companies have a good purchasing and hedging strategy, they can make money. What they will not be able to do is pass benefits on to themselves that otherwise ought to go to the customer.

We need urgent action, which is perhaps a little ironic. My right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley will recall that we have between us been through several Bills, now Acts, and reforms that have passed through the House under the heading of energy market reform. We have seen a great deal of reform, but we certainly have not seen reform of the energy market in all that time. It is time that we got serious about reform of how the energy market works, of its opacity, and of how it does not serve sticky customers properly, victimising and demonising the majority of them. We need urgent action on that. Otherwise, we will be condemned to the same old cycle of price rises, muttering, remedies being tossed around, commissions being engaged, remedies gathering dust on shelves, and then another round of price rises. I commend the motion, but it should herald the start of a serious look at how the whole market works and how the customer can finally be brought into its centre. It is a fine start, but we need to follow it through to the end.

2.56 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): This is the second debate in which I have had the pleasure of speaking this week, Mr Deputy Speaker, and, as the fellow said, truly you're getting to be a habit with me, and I thoroughly welcome that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Always a pleasure.

Jesse Norman: Let that be noted in the record. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) on fighting his way through the dragons of dragons' den and, with his colleagues, securing the booty of this debate, which I greatly welcome. Whatever else its effect might be, it sends a powerful signal about the feelings of not only the Members who have spoken so well today but Members up and down the country on the issues that have been described. I will talk about those issues and the policy and will try to weave in my responses to the speeches during the course of my comments.

The Government are firmly focused on getting the best deal for energy consumers and on ensuring that the market works for everyone. We absolutely expect energy companies to treat all their customers fairly. We therefore continue to be concerned about price rises that will hit millions of people already paying more than they need to. It is not acceptable that five of the largest suppliers are increasing their standard variable prices, hitting customers hard in the pocket when they are already paying more than necessary. It must be noted that wholesale prices, which account for about half of an average bill, are still lower than in 2014. This is a moment not for crisis, but for sober reflection.

Prices are not the same as bills. The recent report from the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee reminded us that electricity bills have risen little over the past 25 years, which is due to insulation, appliance improvement and other things. Prices are not the same as bills, but that is not to say that prices are not important and that price rises are not a matter for concern.

Caroline Flint: It is important that we have a candid, open and honest discussion. The Minister makes a good point about prices versus bills, because the amount of energy that we use has gone down significantly over the past 10 years. Is he as concerned as I am that the big six might be keeping their tariffs unwelcomely high because they are having to compensate for the fact that we are using less energy?

Jesse Norman: It is an interesting suggestion that the changes may have cushioned the effect of price rises in the way the right hon. Lady describes. I thank her for that thought, and I would certainly like to give it some reflection.

John Penrose: Further to the intervention of my co-sponsor, the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), the point about prices versus bills is an important one. Does the Minister agree that if prices stay unfairly or unnecessarily high, one of the Government's other main goals of improving overall productivity across the economy—energy bills are a vital and central part of the cost base for most businesses—will be much harder to achieve? We can do more with less if we are more efficient in our energy sector.

Jesse Norman: This is really a debate about retail energy prices. The problems are less marked in many areas of the business market, but it is undoubtedly true that business bills must be kept as low as possible to encourage productivity. As my hon. Friend knows, the Government have undertaken several steps precisely to achieve that.

Colleagues on both sides of the House have noted that, with suppliers buying their energy up to two years in advance, suppliers should be protected from recent fluctuations in the wholesale energy price. Some suppliers have chosen to act differently by freezing standard variable prices through winter and beyond, which alone shows that price rises are not inevitable. It is a fact that the majority of customers—around 66%—are on standard variable tariffs and continue to pay considerably more than customers on fixed-term deals.

The Competition and Markets Authority highlighted that such customers have been losing out by an estimated £1.4 billion a year—that figure is disputed—over the past few years. There have been persistently high differentials between the cheapest fixed deals and standard variable tariffs. The latest published Ofgem data show the differential to be some £200. There has been good focus today on fuel poverty, as there was the other night, and it is those who can least afford it who are most likely to lose out. Households with low incomes, people with low qualifications, those in the rented sector and those over 65 are more likely to lose out than others. The recent price rises serve only to underline the fact that the majority of consumers are paying more than they need to pay.

What can be done about it? The House widely recognises that, in many markets, effective competition drives down prices, promotes innovation and assists improvement in customer services. The Government have worked hard with Ofgem to try to improve competition. The right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) mentioned “Groundhog Day,” possibly inadvertently casting herself in the role of Andie MacDowell, which is certainly how

I see her. It is not fair to say that we are in “Groundhog Day” because there has been some progress. Members rightly point to the fact that there are now more than 50 energy suppliers in the domestic market, up from 13 in 2010, and of course there are potential new entrants, including local authorities, waiting in the wings—we welcome them to the market. Independent suppliers now have more than 18% of the dual-fuel market, up from less than 1% seven years ago.

I was pleased to hear from the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who mentioned Bristol Energy and the social conscience it brings to energy supply, which is typical of a tier of new and wider-ranging suppliers, including not-for-profit suppliers, that have entered the market—there are housing providers, too. Smaller suppliers are leading the way in using smart, pre-pay and other technologies to support customers in finding the best deal using their mobile phone.

We had a good discussion on switching, and it has been rightly noted that an increasing number of households are switching their energy supplier. There were some 7.8 million energy account switches last year, an increase of 28% on the previous year. Switching is putting increasing competitive pressure on the big six—although, as my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare noted, there is a great deal of churn—but it is still only 15.8% of gas and electricity customers, so we are a long way from a position where anyone should feel that a large number of people are actively availing themselves of the opportunity to switch, as one might expect in a more competitive market.

For too long, too many customers have been left on poor-value deals. At the end of last year, the Government announced new measures to increase transparency for consumers. I welcome the point the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) made about transparency, and he is right: several studies have found that the markets are less transparent here in many different ways than one might like. An effort was made to begin to crack that and increase transparency for consumers, including through the publication of an energy supplier league table by Ofgem, which was designed to shine a light on the most expensive standard variable tariffs.

We know that some consumers worry that switching supplier may be difficult and time-consuming. This is not just an economic matter; it is also a cultural matter. We must recognise that and not allow purely economic analysis to take over. We are also taking forward proposals to mandate Midata in the energy sector, which should also have an effect. Midata will allow consumers to get hold of their energy data electronically and use them to find the best deal. It will make the switching process quicker, easier and more accurate, and, with luck, it will allow people to switch using tablets and smartphone applications more easily. We are very keen that the benefits of this are not restricted, in any sense, to the tech savvy, but are available to anyone who owns a mobile phone at the very least. We will therefore work with industry, switching companies and consumer groups to ensure that all consumers can access and use their data to switch.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) rightly mentioned the time it takes to switch supplier. All I would say is that it used to take five weeks and the Government are working with Ofgem

[*Jesse Norman*]

to get it down now to 21 days. Once we have done that, we will work to push it down to where it should be, which is at 24 hours. That will be a major improvement to our system.

There was some discussion about customer service, where some improvement has been made. The latest Ofgem data show that suppliers received more than 3 million fewer customer complaints in 2016 than in 2014, but as there were still 3.5 million complaints that is not saying much and they still have a long way to go. We are working with Ofgem and the ombudsman to identify and fix systemic issues, which damage customer service. As the House will know, an Ofgem review last year resulted in increased communication between Ofgem, the ombudsman and Citizens Advice, an organisation I greatly esteem, as I know many colleagues do. It is working on developing a rating system that will help customers to see at a glance how their energy suppliers are performing.

As Members noted, the CMA had some positive things to report after concluding its two-year energy market investigation. It found that wholesale energy markets and the retail market for larger businesses are working well, but for domestic energy suppliers the report is a wake-up call. It is important to note that the CMA's report was not unequivocal in every sense, and it has been contested; I note a letter from some senior energy regulators who raised the question of whether it is true to see detriment in the way the CMA has. It is important to acknowledge that fact. However, the CMA's position was clear: consumers should be able to trust energy companies and to know that they are getting a good deal. The CMA found that a lack of competition meant that about 70% of big six customers remained on their supplier's most expensive tariff despite the savings they could make by moving to another tariff. We have encouraged, and Ofgem is introducing, a prepayment meter cap, which will protect 4 million households across Britain from the beginning of next month.

We are determined to go further and, as the House will know, we have a consumer Green Paper in prospect, which will examine specific sectors. We will respond sooner rather than later, and separately, to the CMA energy market report. Our Green Paper will examine markets that are not working fairly for consumers. In general, consumers in this country enjoy strong protections and an effective regime which help them get the best deal, but where those markets are not doing their job—where competition is not effective—the Government will look to intervene to improve competition and to strengthen outcomes.

The Green Paper will complement and sit within the Government's industrial strategy to build on the work to deliver an economy that, as I have described, works for everyone. We announced some proposals in the Budget, including the ending of the cycle of subscription traps, the shortening and simplification of small print, and the introduction of new powers to impose fines on companies that mistreat customers. The Green Paper will provide more detail on those proposals.

Let me round up my speech with a couple of reflections on some of the helpful comments that were made in Members' speeches. I was intrigued to notice that, according to the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), it

is now Labour policy to renationalise the big six companies. I would welcome further clarification on that, together with an explanation of how much it would cost and how it would be funded. That was an interesting contribution.

I very much congratulate and thank my shadow, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test, for recognising the complexity of the problem we face. He is certainly right to focus on transparency. In recognition of that, I assure him and my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare that the Government will reflect on such contributions. The Government's record on intervening in electricity and energy markets is not absolutely unblemished. On several occasions, changes have been made, only for them to have to be unwound because it turned out that they were contrary to competitive pricing or innovation. That is worth recognising.

Caroline Flint: I listened positively to what the Minister said about the Government being prepared to intervene when a market is not working. I remind him that the Confederation of British Industry refers to the energy market as a managed market, because energy is an essential-to-life product; it really is set apart from the products that we discussed earlier, such as toothpaste, that we buy every day. I urge the Minister to stand up for what Governments should do, which is set the framework in which markets operate.

Jesse Norman: The right hon. Lady's point is well taken. One does not need to have read far into "The Wealth of Nations" to know that markets are most effective not only when they are as deep as possible—when the benefits of specialisation and the division of labour, and therefore value generation, can be realised—but when they are supported by a strong state and a strong system of justice and enforcement. That is absolutely the tone of our approach to the market in this case.

I thank right hon. and hon. Members for a thoughtful and interesting debate that has covered a great deal of ground in a limited time. As the House will know, the Government are acting to make switching easier and quicker. We are rolling out smart meters and we are continuing to help the vulnerable and those in low-income households with their energy bills. The CMA did important work to highlight how much consumers are currently losing out, and we recognise that the recent price rises underline the fact that the majority of consumers are paying more, it appears, than they need to. We believe that current practice is not acceptable, and we will set out proposals to address the issues shortly.

3.12 pm

John Penrose: I repeat my thanks, not only to my co-sponsors, the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), but to everybody else who took part in the debate, which has been full of passion and determination. This issue has been around for far too long and, in spite of the best efforts of successive Governments, it has not got better sufficiently quickly, so there is clearly further to travel.

I am very reassured by the direction of travel that the Minister has just laid out. I particularly welcome his comments about rolling out Midata, as it should solve many of the problems with data access, which are

obstacles to switching. However, it has been around for six years, and we are still waiting for its roll out—it is rather like waiting for Godot. We anticipate and we hope that it will arrive very shortly. It is good to hear that there is fresh impetus and fresh energy behind that move.

Equally, 24-hour switching will help to drive up competition. Right the way across the political spectrum and throughout this debate, there has been recognition that progress towards a properly competitive market in which the big six suppliers feel under pressure to look after their customers has been too slow and needs to move faster. I am very reassured to hear my hon. Friend making that commitment from the Government Benches, and saying that it is not moving fast enough. The clear implication of all the speeches we have heard today is that, politically, his way is clear. When people such as me, a bone dry free marketer, and others from across the political spectrum are willing to look at a relative price cap or other measures—I am talking about the Chairman of the Select Committee and the two Opposition Front-Bench speakers, the hon. Members for East Kilbride,

Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) and for Southampton, Test—we can say quite categorically that this is an idea whose time has come. There is a thirst for action and for movement. Therefore, the Government should be bold and willing to move soon.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House deplores the big six energy firms' treatment of out-of-contract energy customers on default tariffs; believes immediate action is needed to protect those consumers, and that pushing customers to start switching will not fix the problem sufficiently quickly or completely on its own; and calls on the industry, regulators and the Government to consider solutions which recognise that many people lead busy lives and that switching their energy supplier may not always be a high priority.

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Andrew Griffiths.*)

3.15 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 16 March 2017

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

Future of Rail (Passenger Experience)

1.30 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Sixth Report from the Transport Committee of Session 2016-17, The future of rail: Improving the rail passenger experience, HC 64, and the Government Response, HC 905.

It is a pleasure, Sir Edward, to serve under your chairmanship.

Our inquiry into improving the rail passenger experience started early last year, as the second of a series of five investigations into the future of rail. We have also looked at rail technology and rail franchising; we are currently considering rail safety; and we will complete our rail inquiries by looking at rail finance and governance.

There is no doubt that the number of people travelling by train has increased dramatically, which is a real success story, but what of the passenger experience? Examining this issue means examining some pretty basic issues. How easy is it to find and purchase the best-value ticket? How crowded is the train? Are there enough seats? How clearly is information presented on websites and apps? Are staff available to assist people at the station and reassure passengers about safety? How well does the train company keep passengers informed about disruption during the journey? Most fundamentally of all, will the train be on time? Will it be on time to the station to which the individual passenger is travelling and not simply on time at its final destination? We identified many improvements that are required, and the need for some of them is very long standing.

Let us consider the first aspect—looking for and buying the best-value ticket for a journey. The sheer complexity of ticketing, with different types of tickets across the patchwork of operators, has been an issue for far too long. Ten years ago, the Transport Committee described the complexity in rail fares as an “insult to the passenger”. In 2006, the Transport Committee decried the fact that the situation had been allowed to persist for several years. Yet last year we found that this fundamental problem had barely been dealt with and that the situation had barely changed, beyond some very small improvements. Some improvements to ticket vending machines had taken place, for example, but they were small improvements in comparison with the scale of the problem. Despite in-depth research by consumer groups and numerous pronouncements by the regulator—the Office of Rail and Road—and the industry, the problem persists.

A particularly unfair phenomenon is split ticketing. It is often possible for passengers who have the knowledge and time to undertake intricate research to save considerable sums of money by buying separate tickets for different portions of the same journey. It was possible to save money through split ticketing on 33 of 50 cross-country

journeys that were examined by *The Times* last year, when it conducted a survey on this problem. This situation is unsatisfactory and unfair. People can pay as much as £85 more than is necessary for a single train journey, for example on the service from Penzance to Birmingham. There is a differential of £85 if someone buys split tickets rather than just buying one ticket. Further examples can be found on numerous routes.

Despite the problem having been well understood for a long time, no one in the rail sector appears to have a grip on it and no one seems to be responsible for dealing with it. The Transport Committee has been told on numerous occasions by a succession of Ministers that this issue will be dealt with, but nothing has happened and nobody seems to have the power to enforce any change.

Recently the Department for Transport, together with the Rail Delivery Group and the regulator, published a plan to deal with these issues; it contained proposals in December about certain trials that were to take place. It is unclear how effective this plan will be and we still do not know the full details of what these trials will be and where they will take place. I assure the Minister that, as a Committee, we will follow this matter up. It is good to have a plan, but we need to know exactly what it is, how effective it is and—if it is effective—how it would be rolled out across the system.

Robert Ffello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Given that there are some extremely good websites out there—I have personal experience of using seat61.com and loco2.com—it is possible, quite straightforwardly, for someone to work out good rail routes, if they have access to a computer. So, given that it is possible, why does it seem so difficult for the Government and the train companies to resolve this issue, and what about those people who do not have access to a computer?

Mrs Ellman: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. If somebody has the time, the knowledge, the ability and the access to the appropriate technology, they can discover a lot of information, but it is not available to everyone, and I find it very surprising that Ministers and the rail sector as a whole are simply unable to take up this issue and ensure that information that is technically available is actually available to the ordinary passenger. That is where my concern lies and where the Committee’s concern lies.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate, which my constituents will follow with great interest. Does she agree that it is also important that passengers are able to buy any sort of ticket, particularly at unstaffed stations, and that one of the urgent priorities is to make sure that ticket machines are put in place in all those stations where no staff are present, including those on the line through Urmston and Trafford Park, many of which do not have such machines?

Mrs Ellman: My hon. Friend makes another excellent point. There is nothing more frustrating for a passenger than to be told that tickets are available, only to go along to their local station and find that that simply is not the case. I say again that this is a long-standing

[Mrs Ellman]

issue. It is known about, Ministers are well aware of it, but very little indeed has been done to resolve it. My hon. Friend has done a great service to her constituents in drawing attention to this issue during this debate.

Rail passengers want clear and accurate information about their journeys. They want information not only on how to go about their journey and what sorts of journeys are available but on how a journey is progressing. Too often, however, that information is simply not being provided.

When we conducted our inquiry and called for evidence, it came flooding in and we saw that passengers were largely negative, first about their experience of train operating companies' websites. One such website was described by a passenger as being

“appalling, badly designed, inefficient, difficult to use, often to the point of being unusable”.

Some smartphone apps seem little better, as they routinely failed to provide reliable information, for example about which platform a train will depart from. Once again, that is basic information and it is galling for passengers to read reports about systems being put in place, which can all sound very good. What really matters is what happens to an individual when they make their journey. That is what really counts.

It is important that the technology is available and accessible, but it is also important that people are actually at hand in stations to give assistance and information. That help is essential for everybody—travellers want to see actual people around who can help them, and give them guidance and information—but for people who have a disability it is absolutely essential. Although the systems in place for assisting people with disabilities to travel by train sometimes work, there are also occasions when those systems break down, which is another great concern for us.

Overcrowding is another ongoing concern. It does not happen everywhere, but where it does happen it is extremely important and creates major obstacles. Many people told us that their journeys were uncomfortable. They often worried about whether they could actually get on the train. Many were concerned about the potential danger in getting on very crowded trains, and that is stressful.

Robert Flello: My hon. Friend is being generous with her time. I had an email recently from a constituent who is trained in first aid and who was concerned about a journey from Birmingham to Wolverhampton; she and others were standing and somebody fainted so she went to provide assistance. There was not space for the person to lie down, as is required when giving first aid to someone who has fainted. When the train crew got on, they said, “This happens regularly, because the train is so regularly crowded. We are used to people passing out.”

Mrs Ellman: My hon. Friend draws attention to a situation that is all too common. If there is sporadic overcrowding, that can perhaps be coped with, but when it happens regularly, it requires attention and the situation is not being addressed. A great deal of the publicity about overcrowding relates to commuter lines into London, and that is where most of the overcrowding

takes place, but it does not solely affect London. There is overcrowding on other routes, too. In Manchester, rush-hour trains are on average 4% over capacity, with 12% of passengers regularly standing. That is a lot of people, and average figures mask a lot of difference. The top 10 overcrowded train services in England and Wales are between 61% and 129% over capacity. Eight of the 10 most overcrowded services are in the London area, with two in Manchester, but there are examples throughout the country. This issue needs attention and it must not be ignored.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Ellman: Yes, I will.

Will Quince *rose*—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. Normally if a Member wishes to intervene, they arrive in time for the beginning of the debate. Please continue, Mrs Ellman.

Mrs Ellman: Thank you, Sir Edward. The Department is well aware of this long-standing problem. It must identify places where overcrowding has become a persistent serious problem, making journeys uncomfortable. The train companies, through the franchise agreements negotiated with the Department, should be required to identify where there is a serious problem and take action to alleviate overcrowding on specific services. I hope that the Minister will confirm that he is looking at the problem and is proposing action to address it.

Over the past day or two, there has been a lot of discussion about the consultation on the Southeastern franchise, which has rightly raised the big issue of overcrowding. The consultation puts forward certain proposals for dealing with the issue, but it is not a problem just for new franchises; the problem is being experienced now, and it requires the Department's attention. It relates to the train operating companies and the provision of rolling stock.

I repeat the question that I have asked a succession of Ministers numerous times in a succession of meetings: who is responsible for the long-term planning and delivery of rolling stock? That might sound like a pretty basic, simple, fundamental question, but I have never received a straightforward answer; the nearest I have got is something about “the Department”. I then ask, “Who is it in the Department? The Minister? The Secretary of State?” Then the clarity disappears.

When we come across specific issues and problems—there was one a couple of years ago when a carriage was moved from an important service in the north to go to the then Prime Minister's constituency—Ministers appear to be powerless. I was told by the then Secretary of State, “It will get resolved.” It did get resolved, in the end and after a great deal of fuss, but I still had no answer to the question of who was actually responsible. The Minister is very diligent about these matters, so I hope he will be able to give a clearer answer. Who is responsible for the long-term planning and delivery of rolling stock, including new rolling stock and refurbishment?

People are facing a whole range of problems in undertaking their journeys on rail. Perhaps one constant feature, which overrides other rail issues, is the constant

challenge of the rail system's fragmentation. Time and again we come back to the issue of how the sector will work together more cohesively to give the best possible service to the passenger.

The Rail Delivery Group was set up to bring the rail sector together. Yes, it has made some improvements, but it has not addressed the basic issues. How will it change the way it operates? Does it need more powers? Do franchises need to be different? Should the Department and Ministers act in a different way? How can the rail regulator be more effective in taking action? That is not clear. Does the regulator need more powers? If so, what are they? What action does the Minister propose to take to make that a reality? The most disappointing thing about the challenges that the Committee and I have identified is that most of them are not new: they are long standing. Despite the best efforts of a succession of Ministers and the Department, not a great deal has changed, and we simply cannot go on like that.

As our inquiry was under way, a major crisis was developing on Southern rail, which is part of the Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern franchise. It is run by the parent company, Govia Thameslink Railway—known as GTR—but I will refer to it as Southern, because that is the area in which the bulk of the problems have arisen and where the bulk of the difficulties are for passengers.

As we were conducting our inquiry, passengers on the route were becoming increasingly exasperated and angry that their rail service, for which many pay several thousand pounds a year, was inadequate and utterly unreliable. Whether passengers are paying several thousand pounds a year for a season ticket or simply paying their fare, they are equally entitled to have a proper service, but that was not happening. The situation remains virtually the same, with passengers suffering mass cancellations and inordinate delays. People's jobs have been put at risk, simply because they cannot get to work on time. Some people reported that they have moved house because of the problem.

Life has been disrupted. Why? It is a sorry combination of a too-large franchise, poor management, misjudgment and disastrous industrial relations, which have conspired to create an appalling situation for passengers. The ongoing strikes have compounded a series of errors and incompetence. Passengers are right to be angry, but the Department does not seem to be doing much about the situation except to accept that there is a big problem.

It cannot be acceptable for those responsible for the problem—not just one party is responsible; responsibility must be shared by a multiplicity of organisations and individuals—to fail so comprehensively and for so long and to appear not to be acting. In 2016 alone, 58,983 train journeys were partly or wholly cancelled. That is a tremendous figure. I do not think the travelling public want to hear all the arguments about who is responsible. They just know that it is a fact that their lives are still being disrupted and that nothing much is changing, and they want something done about it.

The Department has already accepted that the franchise that was drawn up was much too large. It is the largest in the country. It is uniquely large; it contains more than a fifth of all the passenger journeys across Britain's entire network. It is too large a franchise, and the Department has said that that was its mistake.

Add to that the situation on the ground and the complexity of major infrastructure works planned during the course of the franchise agreement, including the huge and logistically challenging Thameslink programme, and there was a recipe for calamitous passenger experience. The impact of the Thameslink programme on passenger services was substantially underestimated. The estimated number of delay minutes was forecast to be 10,000 per year; the reality has been 10,000 per week. I ask the Minister how that estimate could be so disastrously wrong. It has contributed substantially to the problem.

If we add to those things—too large a franchise and a major infrastructure challenge, the impact of which was grossly underestimated—inadequate levels of staffing, the situation becomes even worse. The industrial action on top of that has escalated the situation to an unacceptable level.

I mention one other factor; I suspect hon. Members will find it difficult to believe if they are not already aware of it. At the very beginning of the franchise, the company did not have enough drivers to operate the trains. That part has been rectified—except for the fact that we are now in a dispute about driver-only operation—but having insufficient drivers at the beginning of the franchise does not suggest great competence.

The question for the Department and the Minister to answer is: what is being done? The franchise was constructed on a management fee basis, which is currently unique, because of the anticipated risk. The revenues go directly to the Government and a fee is paid to the train operator, so there is no risk in that sense. I have described the nature of the services and the problems. The train operator receives an annual management fee of around £1 billion; probably around £3 billion has been paid out to date. Under that system, the public purse foots the bill for losses that occur from lost sales, disruption and passenger compensation.

I do not have an up-to-date figure of exactly how much has been lost and how much the public purse will have to pay out, but the latest figure I have is £38 million and rising. That was supplied by the Minister in a letter to me some time ago. Compensation schemes have been announced since then, and we do not know how they are operating or how much money is involved. The bill could be increasing substantially.

To add to the complexity and difficulty, there is the issue of force majeure, which concerns the dispute—ongoing and unresolved, as far as I am aware—between the train operating company and the Department for Transport about who is responsible for all those cancelled services. Who is responsible for those 58,983 and more train journeys that were wholly or partly cancelled? There is an unresolved dispute between the Department and the train company, with no end date in sight. That cannot be acceptable. All this is continuing—passengers are getting more and more angry, and there is no end date. I hope the Minister can tell us what is happening and when it will be resolved. The public also have a right to know what the Department's plans are to deal with the situation.

The franchise is due to run until September 2021. I would not like to anticipate the extent or the level of anger that passengers are going to be feeling by then if nothing changes. What is the Department doing? Is it considering restructuring the franchise—perhaps dividing

[Mrs Ellman]

it up and allocating different parts to different operators? There is silence. We simply do not know what is happening. Doing nothing is simply not enough.

Kate Green: My hon. Friend is highlighting well-publicised problems at Southern Rail. She will know that, in the last few weeks, a similar dispute began with Northern Rail, which serves both her constituency and mine. Does she agree that Ministers need to take action swiftly so that we do not end up in the long drawn-out and unresolved situation with Northern Rail that passengers have had to suffer at Southern Rail? Will she call on the Minister to tell us what swift action the Government are taking?

Mrs Ellman: I agree with my hon. Friend. The issue is escalating and is now not solely to do with Southern Rail. I hope the Minister is able to tell us what he and the Department are doing to deal with this unacceptable situation. However blame is apportioned, it is the passengers who are suffering.

I thank the Minister for certain steps that he has taken in relation to Southern Rail, which have an impact on the rest of the rail network. The Committee was extremely concerned to find that the Department was not making information available about its monitoring of the franchise and whether contractual benchmarks were being met. After a lot of pressure from the Committee, the Minister agreed that that information would be made publicly available as far as it could be—not simply for Southern Rail, but across the network for other franchises.

I thank the Minister for responding to our concerns so swiftly when he realised their extent, but I have to ask when that information will actually be made available, for Southern Rail and for franchises in the rest of the country. It is extremely important that the Department monitors franchises. Because of its failures, the situation in the Southern franchise has now reached dramatic proportions, but there are other issues in other parts of the rail network and the Department is equally responsible there. I would like some information on that monitoring.

I have dwelt at some length on what is happening at Southern Rail because it is such a traumatic, ongoing event, but also because some of its features can be applied in other areas. We have major infrastructure works planned for other parts of the network as well. Will the Minister ensure that the problems in miscalculations made in relation to infrastructure on Southern Rail will not be replicated in other parts of the country when major infrastructure works take place? That is a very important question.

It is important to go back to the beginning and ask how we know what passengers' concerns are and whether we are monitoring them properly. The rail sector does have ways of monitoring passengers' views. There is an annual rail passenger survey, and other things are done, but the Committee felt that they were not really adequate because some of the information that we picked up from passengers was not reflected in some of the official statistics that had been collected. I would ask that that whole system be looked at again.

Later in this Parliament, we will complete our "future of the rail" series of inquiries by looking at rail finance and governance, and how important changes should

and can be implemented. I am in no doubt that the massive increase in the numbers of people using trains is a success story and I applaud many of the developments in our rail service. In many ways, it has been a success—but there are major problems and issues, and one is the passenger experience.

I have outlined some of the report's findings today, and I thank all Committee members, a number of whom are here this afternoon, for their work and dedication. They looked at the issue as a whole and have drawn attention to their own individual information and experience from their role as constituency MPs. I thank them for that.

We are all working to secure one end: to bring improvements. I conclude by thanking the Minister for the attention he has already shown to some aspects of the issue. However, the Committee would like to know what else will be done so that passengers' experience can be improved, on a growing and increasingly successful railway.

1.59 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, as always, Sir Edward. I thank the Chairman of the Transport Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), for comprehensively summarising our inquiry. I would like to focus on two or three things and give one or two local examples from my constituency of the failure of both the services and the ticketing arrangements.

The hon. Lady spoke of the dispute on Southern. The only comment I want to add to that and to what is in the report is how amazing I find it that we were told by the two company representatives that there were not enough drivers to operate the services from day one, due to an unexpected fall in the number during the change-over of the franchises. They said that they did not know on day one, but surely they could not have been so incompetent not to have known on day one minus 10 or 20.

It is amazing that, on day one, the company should not have enough staff to operate the services they had committed to. I do not think we managed to tease this out of the Minister at the meeting—perhaps we did and my memory is failing me—but did the Department know that on day one the company could not provide the services it had contracted for?

The hon. Lady gave many examples relating to ticketing. We were told how complex it is because there are so many different routes and tickets, but that applies to many industries. Why are the ticketing arrangements on the railways so far behind the airlines, for example? They have speeded up their process, and it is now pretty easy to check in and get a ticket. I find it amazing that, after all this time and so many promises and reports, we are not able to ensure ease of operation.

The report is about the rail passenger experience, the first part of which is getting a ticket and getting information about train times. The hon. Lady gave an example of different websites giving a ticket price difference of £80. I did a bit of research this morning on how to get from my Cleethorpes constituency to Haverfordwest. Perhaps not a great many people do that journey, but I happen to have family in Haverfordwest and I have done it on a number of occasions. Amazingly enough, it can be done with only one change in Stockport.

I went on the National Rail website. National Rail sounds important, doesn't it? People look at it and think, "This is the Rolls-Royce of websites." Okay, it has got the information, but it is, shall we say, variable. When I tap in, "Cleethorpes to Haverfordwest", the website says at the top, "Buy the cheapest for £157". That is for a single adult standard class ticket.

Buying a ticket from Cleethorpes to Stockport costs £21. There are numerous fares at different times of the day to then go from Stockport to Haverfordwest, but I chose to leave Cleethorpes at 9.26. I was told that it would be £157, and that if I went 2 hours later it would be £163.80. If I go on the 9.26, I pay £21 to get to Stockport and £44.50 to get from Stockport to Haverfordwest. That is almost a £100 difference. If a family of three or four do that, let us be honest, they are being robbed—there is no getting away from it.

Having gone to south Wales, I thought, "I wonder whether it is cheaper to get to north Wales," and I did a similar exercise going from Cleethorpes to Bangor; I accept that perhaps not many people do that on a daily basis. Again, I found that if the journey is done in three stages, it can be done for £56.20, whereas the headline says, "Cheapest fare £81.40."

My final example is to get from Cleethorpes to Felixstowe, which again I found can be done £15 cheaper than what is stated at the top of the webpage—mind you, four tickets are necessary to do that, so perhaps the convenience makes it worth it. In this day and age, this is not rocket science. If the railway companies cannot do it themselves, somebody else should be made to do it on their behalf, and they should have to pay to have it done.

Obviously, I travel down here from Cleethorpes every week and back again, and I am always amazed at how many times my tickets are not checked. There are no ticket barriers at Cleethorpes or where I change at Doncaster, and at least 50% of the time the barriers at King's Cross are not operational. I have done that journey time and again—I could have saved the taxpayers no end of money if I had just taken a chance on it, but we are all honest, aren't we?

Kate Green: I totally support the hon. Gentleman's comments about tickets not being checked. The situation is exacerbated when there is no machine on the station platform and no staff from whom one can buy a ticket. On my local line, passengers regularly travel between Urmston and Trafford Park, for example, without paying—not because they are not willing to pay, but because there is absolutely no way they can do so.

Martin Vickers: The hon. Lady is absolutely correct. Seeing you in the Chair, Sir Edward, reminds me of the journeys that can be made from Cleethorpes to Lincoln via Market Rasen. There is often an announcement on the 9.20 train from Grimsby to Lincoln saying, "This train will be overcrowded when we get to Market Rasen. Can we get the tickets sorted out quickly?"

That brings me to overcrowding. You have probably used that 9.20 train yourself, Sir Edward. It leaves Market Rasen at about 10 o'clock in the morning and delivers you to Lincoln or Newark, where you can get down to King's Cross. The reality is that it is a single unit, and has been one for years and years, despite the fact that it is regularly overcrowded when it leaves Market Rasen.

Robert Ffello: Absolutely, and the same is true on the train that runs through Stoke-on-Trent on the Crewe-Derby line. It is a single unit and overcrowded, but nothing has been done for years. Nobody seems to care.

Martin Vickers: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. As the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside said, there is even a top 10 of overcrowding. I do not know whether the Market Rasen service is on it, but it certainly ought to be. The reality is that it is a single unit. East Midlands Trains will say, as it has said to me, "There isn't enough rolling stock available, even when it cascades down after new stock has come on," but that has been the case for 10 years. How long does it take to produce a new diesel unit to run that service?

If trains are regularly overcrowded, notwithstanding the fact that the rail experience is not particularly desirable from the passenger's point of view, surely the companies are falling down on the commitments they made in their franchises. If they are not falling down on their commitments, the franchise agreements need tightening up.

Finally—the Minister would not expect me not to mention this issue; we have spoken about it on many occasions—the rail experience is much better if people do not have to change trains and there are through services. British Rail ended through services from Cleethorpes to King's Cross in 1992, and it is about time they were restored.

I know the Minister is sympathetic and that you, Sir Edward, are sympathetic, because you would like through services to go through Market Rasen and Lincoln as they used to. It is about time that the Minister made some more sympathetic noises and guided me through the system, so that in the not-too-distant future—preferably before the next general election—we have an absolute commitment to provide such a service.

2.10 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) on her introduction to the report and the Government response. I came on to the Committee part way through the investigation, but I feel a certain amount of ownership because in my previous life on the Select Committee I was involved in the 2006 report. I am dismayed to be back here still debating exactly the same things we raised in our report all that time ago.

Before the 1997 general election I went to an event attended by the comedian and satirist John Bird, back when rail privatisation was still in its fledgling years. He said that the rail operating companies had given up calling people "passengers" because they did not want to give them the idea that they had any intention of taking them anywhere. People served by Southern and Southeastern—my constituents are served by Southeastern—get the impression that nothing at all has changed since. Things have not moved on.

The passenger experience is at the heart of what we should be seeking to achieve in our railways. It is not satisfactory to say that the railways must be a success because so many more people are travelling on them. People travelling on Southern, for example, do so because they have no alternative but to suffer the service they are being offered. After all, there are few alternatives for getting to work other than to suffer that service.

[Clive Efford]

The poor performance of Southern and Southeastern is exacerbated by the development taking place at London Bridge. I commend the railway industry for keeping London Bridge operating while such an incredible feat of engineering is taking place—to add two additional lines through so busy a station while keeping much of it operating is quite an achievement—but that does not excuse the frequency with which my constituents are inconvenienced because the infrastructure has broken down, whether it is a set of points at Charing Cross, London Bridge or Lewisham, as is frequently the case, or a train that is blocking the rail. That is too often the experience of the customer.

Recently, quite late one evening, coming back from the House, I was at Waterloo East and the trains were all delayed—I cannot remember whether it was a train or the points on that occasion. A woman standing next to me shouted across to the central platforms of the station, trying to get some information from the staff about how she could get to the station that she wanted to get to. They were holding their hands to their ears, trying to hear what she was saying, then a train trundled between them and stopped at the platform. The woman sauntered off down the platform and the train left, while the staff kept talking to each other on the other platform. The impression was that the staff were so beaten down by the quality of the service that they had given up making any attempt to assist passengers.

There is something in that about the quality of the customer interface; the interaction of staff and passengers who have been inconvenienced. That needs to be addressed and the Government should hold the train operating companies to account for it. It is not good enough to collect statistics. The companies should train their staff to react and respond to passengers, in particular when the service is disrupted, and they should be readily available to provide prompt advice. Waterloo East station has four platforms, but on that occasion four members of staff were all on the two central platforms. Why were they not deployed to help the customers who needed information? Southeastern needs a rocket under it to provide better information. I have other experiences, which I could go into.

Robert Ffello: I am enjoying my hon. Friend's contribution. I wanted to make a point about some of our stations, as I shall very shortly experience the joys of Euston station, to get back to Stoke. Why is it, for example, that we are told only 15 minutes before departure which platform our train to Stoke is to leave from, even though the train has been there for ages? That sort of thing drives people crazy.

Clive Efford: My hon. Friend's intervention is incredibly timely, because I was about to go on to describe my attempts to get to Stoke-on-Trent on Virgin Trains on 23 February. I was fortunate that I did not take the 10.30 am train as my colleagues had. It had left, but perhaps my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), who is present, only got to Stafford at 8 o'clock in the evening, as my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) did. He texted me from there; he had been travelling for more than 10 hours. My train did not leave at all. I sat there for 45 minutes and finally it was

cancelled, although that turned out to be fortunate, because I did not end up trapped half way up the country, nowhere near where I wanted to go.

I then tried to claim my ticket back. I know we are going to do an inquiry into this, but it too is part of the passenger experience. As instructed, I went on to the Virgin website to claim my ticket back, but there was no facility to say that my train had been cancelled. I was allowed to say that my train had been delayed, but I was unable to say that it had been cancelled. Every time I pressed the button, I was sent back to the beginning, so I took to Twitter and asked, "Is anyone else having this problem with Virgin rail?" I am sure because I am a Member of Parliament and on the Select Committee, I then got Rolls-Royce treatment—[*Interruption.*] It was absolutely Rolls-Royce, because Virgin wrote back to me saying, "Dear Joseph", and that they were sorry about my customer experience. They also sent me half the money and we finally resolved the matter. The point, however, is that the experience should not be like that.

In the report one of the online ticketing companies, Trainline, said that people were uncertain whether they had bought the cheapest ticket, which was a barrier to some people choosing to use rail at all. Which companies make the cost of their product so opaque that it might put customers off, other than one that has a trapped market and people who have no choice but to use that service, no matter how bad it is? We really need to deal with that customer experience.

My last point is about overcrowding and capacity. I go back to Southeastern. The figures in the report show that Southeastern operates an appalling service. It is one of the worst, and it should be thankful for Southern which stops it from being bottom of the customer satisfaction rankings. When we consider that every day so many people in south-east London rely on that surface rail service to get to work, and that there is no alternative but road, we realise what an appalling service it is and what an appalling and disproportionate impact it has on the lives of people from that part of London.

Many people think that the whole of London is served by the underground, but my part of London is well outside the orbit of the underground, and buses from outer south-east London take a devil of a time to get into central London. We rely almost entirely on that commuter rail service, and it is not acceptable that it is such an appalling performer. When we do get on trains, they are overcrowded at peak times because they are not long enough and there are so few alternatives to that rail service.

We have lengthened the platforms, so let us now lengthen the trains. We need to ensure that we have the capacity on Southeastern rail services so that people can get on the trains at peak time. We need 12-car trains serving the metro services in south-east London so that constituents from north Kent and my constituency can get to work comfortably and on time every day. Thank you, Sir Edward, for allowing me to make that contribution.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. Mr Quince, I was a bit hard on you. If you wish to make a comment now, you may.

Will Quince *indicated dissent.*

2.20 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) on securing the debate, which I have found fascinating—I must confess that I did not think I would. I am pleased to be here to sum up for the third party in the House.

The hon. Lady was encyclopaedic in her knowledge and wonderful in explaining the key issues. I will not repeat each and every one, but she talked about ticketing—as did the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), to whom I will come in a moment—and that rings all sorts of bells. We need a method across the entire rail network for getting the best deal for customers.

At this point, I should declare an interest: I frequently use the Virgin Trains West Coast, and with my senior railcard I manage to get some good discounts. However, because of the nature of how we work in this place, I cannot always book a ticket when that would be cheapest, which makes it very expensive.

I totally understand overcrowding on trains. I am fortunate in that I do not have to commute around London; even though my claustrophobia is now much better, I do not know whether I could do it. Sometimes, when I see how bad the tube is, I am able to step back and wait for 20 minutes until things calm down, but that cannot be done on a train. I feel very sorry for people who have to go through that on a daily basis.

The biggest issue seems to be how the franchises are handed out. We hear that some franchises were given to operators who did not have enough drivers—that is a complete disgrace. As the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside said, passengers should be entitled to a full service, but, if I picked it up correctly, 58,500 cancellations took place in a week—not in a year?

Mrs Ellman: That was in one year—in 2016, to be specific.

Marion Fellows: I stand corrected. However, in anyone's book that number of cancellations is not acceptable. The management fee basis on which the Southern franchise was put out seems to be quite a drain on the public purse and something that the Government should look at as quickly as possible.

Clive Efford: Did the Scottish National party Government in Scotland learn anything from the franchising process we have undergone in England? The passenger survey shows that, since the Scottish Government privatised the service to Abellio, satisfaction in the service has declined, and the service has declined since then. I wonder whether any lessons—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. I do not think we need to start debating Scottish railways—unless you really want to, Marion Fellows—because I am not sure they are germane.

Marion Fellows: Perhaps we should. It is important that the Minister hears how we dealt with these things in Scotland so that he can take on board some of the things the Government there have done.

The hon. Member for Cleethorpes gave us an interesting and humorous list of journeys from Cleethorpes to Haverfordwest. I really enjoyed that. I could introduce him to someone I know well who regularly journeys from here in London to north of Dundee. She is an expert on how to get the best deal with split ticketing. However, the whole point is that people should not have to become experts in that area. There should be a way of simply going on to a website and finding the cheapest journey as easily as possible.

The hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) referred to his time on the Select Committee in a former Parliament and was disturbed to find that we are still dealing with the same issues. I know you do not want me to go on for too long, Sir Edward, so I will not do a full summing up of what everyone else said, but, for the Minister's benefit, yes, there were issues in Scotland over the franchise given to Abellio, but after much consternation among passengers, the Scottish Government brought in an improvement plan and since then things have moved forward. The score for ScotRail on the passenger satisfaction survey was at 83%, which was lower than the previous year, but in the last month or so it has gone back up to about 90%—a number that many companies and commuters in the south-east of England would be delighted to have.

The Scottish Government have put more than £5 billion in an investment programme for the five-year period to 2019. We will open new stations and build new lines. We see that as a way to get a greener Scotland and to increase Scotland's economic base.

I commend to the House the ten-minute rule Bill that my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry)—I myself have to read his constituency because it is so vast—introduced in the Chamber only this week. What we really need in Scotland is Network Rail to be devolved. The Scottish Government can take forward many programmes, but ultimately Network Rail is not devolved, which means it does not have full control over the rail network in Scotland.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. I know the hon. Lady will want to speak to the report.

Marion Fellows: Yes, I shall do—I apologise, Sir Edward. It is important for the Minister to understand that it is possible to improve things and move them forward. As part of the process of making things better on the English railways, if I can put it that way, he may also want to look at taking powers to nationalise them again, as we did in Scotland, so that Government organisations and national organisations could bid for franchises. That happened on the east coast main line, and it ran very well.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I want to come back to the hon. Lady's point on further fragmentation of the rail network. How does she feel the passenger experience of travelling on the railways would improve if the management of the infrastructure were further fragmented by having part of it devolved to Scotland, even though many franchises operate in both Scotland and the rest of the UK?

Marion Fellows: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I could speak of a personal constituency issue: there were real difficulties with the electrification

[*Marion Fellows*]

of the Glasgow to Edinburgh line. Transport Scotland was responsible for part of it, but some of the issues were being dealt with down here with Network Rail. That made it difficult to get real accountability. The Scottish Government wanted to be accountable for everything, but they could not be because Network Rail is not devolved. That is why we ask for it to be devolved.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Lady is being generous with her time in giving way. When we consider some of the services that operate on the west coast main line and the east coast main line that cross the border, does she not accept that it would be even more difficult to operate a seamless passenger experience if those operators had to deal with both Network Rail in England and a separate network rail in Scotland?

Marion Fellows: I see where the hon. Lady is coming from, but no, I would not agree with that; at the moment it is working well. I see no reason why the Scottish Government would make life difficult for Network Rail in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. I am sorry, but I cannot agree with her on this occasion.

I will end there, Sir Edward; thank you for the opportunity.

2.30 pm

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank the Transport Committee for its excellent report. It sets out the details very clearly and is also readable, which is great. I am grateful that it focuses on passengers. We hear so much about train operating companies, Network Rail and the Department for Transport, but the report focuses on passengers and their experiences. They are the bottom line and the end receivers of all of this.

I will briefly say something about Select Committees. In my first five years in Parliament I was a member of the Education Committee. In my experience, Select Committees work really hard and their reports are full of good analysis, hard work and excellent recommendations. Governments do not generally take up those recommendations immediately, but over a period of two or three years, they tend to drip into manifestos and legislation. I therefore give credit to the Minister; I think he has accepted all of the report's recommendations in full or in part, which I think says something about the report's excellence. On the recommendations that he has accepted in full, given the Department for Transport's history, can we not have a long, protracted period of announcement after announcement and just get on with delivering on them?

The bottom line and the reason for the series of five reports, of which this is one, is that rail passengers in the United Kingdom pay some of the highest fares in Europe and receive a poor, and in some cases very poor, service in return. In January this year, rail fares again rose above the rate of inflation, at a time when many commuters face a daily struggle to and from work to get there on time or to get there at all. That is down to the poor and deteriorating performance of train operating companies—not all of them, but far too many. While we in here might debate the high-level stuff about who should run the railways—whether it should be the market,

whether it should be publicly owned and so on—rail passengers I speak to do not really care about that. They want an efficient, effective, affordable and accessible railway system. That is not what they are getting at the moment.

Given that the Government accept 13 of the recommendations in full and six in part, and do not disagree with any of the Committee's recommendations, I will focus on the areas for which the Government only partially accept the recommendations. I ask the Minister to look again at the Government's responses to the Committee's criticisms and the recommendations that they have not wholeheartedly accepted. As the Committee forcibly points out, passenger experience, particularly and especially on the Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern franchise, has been "woeful". It puts that down to

"inadequate planning, weaknesses in the franchise handover process, infrastructure and rolling stock failures, mismanagement, poor industrial relations".

The report states that the Department for Transport must "get a grip". It actually says that, and I think anyone who has ever travelled on that franchise would agree. I recently took a journey on that franchise. I am from the north-east and do not normally travel on Southern, but I thought I should experience these things if I was to talk about them, so I did. I travelled down to Brighton and came back in the rush hour, and it was absolute hell; it beggars belief that people have to pay enormous amounts of money to endure that daily hell.

In the light of the report, the Department for Transport can no longer claim that no operator could do a better job than TSGN; in fact, it is hard to see how any operator could do a worse job. However, the whole blame does not rest solely with that train operating company. A lack of transparency over performance against contractual obligations is down to the Department for Transport. A lack of publicly available data for monitoring is down to the Department for Transport. A woefully inadequate franchise, including lack of proper information at the time of the bidding process, is down to the Department for Transport.

Even, as we have heard, the lack of drivers at the start of the franchise is down to the Department for Transport in part. Anyone who has ever run a company, public organisation or any kind of organisation knows that there will be significant staff wastage at a point of change, including in a handover period. Staff will take the opportunity to move on to other companies or jobs or to retire. Anyone who does not take account of that is quite frankly negligent. I think that is down to the Department as well as the train operating company. The failure to address that demonstrates a gross lack of knowledge or experience, insufficient due diligence or a lack of care on behalf of both the Department and the franchisee—or probably a combination of all of those factors.

Current and deteriorating industrial relations issues clearly have a part to play in this. The Committee is absolutely right to point out that those disputes can ultimately be resolved only through negotiation between Govia Thameslink Railway and the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers. However, given the Department for Transport's unusually direct involvement in that franchise, it should take greater responsibility for fostering productive negotiations. The Secretary of State's current Pontius Pilate-like handling of this is

simply not good enough; this is the Government's business and the Secretary of State has to get involved, not least to stop the dispute from spreading any further. He owes that to passengers. The dispute is not insolvable. The Government need to get the parties together and take a lead. The alternative is that it spreads across the country, as we are beginning to see now, with more and more franchises and passengers becoming involved.

We have heard a lot about Scottish rail and all its difficulties, which I accept entirely. There was a ten-minute rule Bill yesterday about handing over Network Rail to the Scottish Government; given that they have done such a cracking job of everything else that has been delegated to them, as somebody who lives on the east coast I think it would be an act of negligence for the Government to do so. However, I have to give credit where it is due, even though I dislike doing so: this dispute has been solved in Scotland. The roof did not cave in and the world did not come to an end; it was simply solved. If they can solve it in Scotland, we can solve it here. It needs some Government will and a bit of heavy lifting on all sides.

The Minister will expect me to say something on recommendation five of the report and the impact of driver-only operation on disabled people's access—particularly in relation to “turn up and go”. The Committee asks for research to be undertaken into the potential impact of DOO on disabled passengers and for the Department to use that research to issue guidance to train operating companies to help them mitigate potential detrimental effects on disabled passengers; in other words, to make the reasonable adjustments they need to make under the law. That is reasonable and is the very least the Government could do.

Before I came to this place, I worked with disabled young people in education. I know how hard their lives are, and while I was not always able to give them everything that they wanted, I spent a great deal of time trying to give them what they needed. I know that a great deal can be done to mitigate detrimental effects with technology and through equipment, but ultimately, my experience is that it always comes down to the intervention of people. To pretend otherwise is simply disingenuous. Providing more accessible trains and buses is good. Providing audible and visual displays is good. Providing an ombudsman is good, although disabled passengers tell me that they do not want an ombudsman who will bung them a few quid a year or several months after an event. They want to be able to travel, as we all do, when they need to and with dignity, and unless the Department for Transport or the train operating companies demonstrate to them otherwise, that will mean a person other than the driver on the train or the platform to assist them.

I have always thought that the role of Government is to ensure that as we move forward no one is left behind. Frankly, if Government do not believe in that, they do not have a right to call themselves a Government; they are nothing other than a special interest group. Disabled passengers are not asking a great deal. They simply want to be able to travel when they need to, and with dignity, and that requires people.

The strength of this report is that it is not about the Department for Transport, the train operating companies or Network Rail but about the passengers, who are currently being woefully let down. I thank the Select Committee for that.

2.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), on securing the debate, and all the Committee members who have attended it as well as the other hon. Members who have participated in it.

I am pleased that the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) has, to her surprise, enjoyed the debate. Let me warn her to be careful: rail is a very seductive and addictive issue. Transport was my first Select Committee, and look what has happened to me. I put it down to the good stewardship of its Chairman that I am where I am today, so the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw should watch out for what might occur, either here or in Edinburgh—who knows?

I thank the Select Committee for its report, which is of the usual high standard. As has been suggested, I take these reports very seriously indeed. I know how much work goes into compiling them, cross-examining witnesses and drawing sensible conclusions, so I never take any report such as this lightly.

Much of the report came from an evidence session that I did on, I think, day three of being in my current role. I was a little petrified, to say the least, but the report reflects what I said, and I stand by every word of it. However, since that appearance, my knowledge has developed a bit—thank goodness—and of course the circumstances that we are addressing on the railways have changed. I want to use this opportunity to discuss some of the recommendations in the report, as well as the points made today by my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Eford) and the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass).

One important point made—by the hon. Member for North West Durham, I think—was that actions speak louder than words. We can all agree to specific points in reports and so on, but what matters is actions. Ticketing reform is a good case study for that. I remember when we looked at ticketing reform in the Select Committee—I think that was in 2012. There was a big, thick, wodgey Government document—I think it was about 200 pages in two sections—with everything that they were going to do to reform ticketing and make it all work fine on behalf of the consumer. Nothing ever happened with that. I got it out soon after my appointment as a Minister and reread it, thinking, “Maybe there are some clues in here.” And I thought, “Well, I'm not going to repeat that mistake.”

In my first week as Minister, there was a significant news story about split ticketing on the front page of *The Times*. I immediately sat down with my officials and said, “Right. Passenger experience has to be the key issue that we focus on,” and everyone said, “Okay, how do we define passenger experience?”, because in a sense, as we have heard today, it means everything.

Passenger experience is every single interaction between a customer who wants to travel by train and the train operators. It is quite hard to segment down, but segment we must, so when it came to my recent fares and ticketing action plan, I did not want just a list of actions that I wanted the industry to take at some future date.

[Paul Maynard]

I wanted quite specific itemised actions, with a delivery date—because delivery dates are often quite rare in these action plans—that we could hold the industry and, indeed, the Department to account on. As the Minister, I could then start to measure whether we were achieving those goals.

Just this week, for example, I was pleased to note that the Rail Delivery Group has changed its rules on how those who leave their railcards at home are compensated. Gradually, slowly but surely, the ticketing action plan is coming into effect; that is happening as rapidly as possible. I find that all too often the greatest hurdles relate to system change—programming the computers and ensuring that each computer can speak to every other computer, so that we can then get the outcomes we want.

A large number of comments today and, indeed, the bulk of this report, focused on the issues involving GTR. I know that the Select Committee has taken a close interest in that matter, so I want to try to address it. It will come as no surprise to those gathered here today when I say that the performance of GTR is not good enough. It continues to be not good enough; I continue to be dissatisfied. I expect GTR to run a timely, reliable and predictable service for passengers, but I will only ever look at changes to that franchise arrangement if that delivers an improvement on behalf of passengers and is not merely for the sake of structural change.

The report highlighted the fact that we did not wholly accept the case that someone might do a better job. I entirely accept, philosophically, that yes, someone one day might be able to do a better job. My concern at the moment is to ensure that there is not a severe deterioration in provision because of yet another handover in franchise operator. We need to evolve this franchise into a much better place.

Pat Glass: I understand that, but where is the point at which the Minister says, “This far and no more. We cannot any longer carry on with a franchise that is failing again and again?”

Paul Maynard: The hon. Lady makes a fair point. I do not think that it is for me as a Minister to say that there is a specific target that must be hit. What I expect GTR to be doing on a regular basis is seeking to improve performance, and I will talk the hon. Lady through what I expect GTR to do.

The punctuality of services operated by GTR was at 73.1% over the 12 months to 4 March 2017. That compares significantly unfavourably with the London and south-east average of 85.2%. No one can pretend that it is anything other than simply unacceptable. It is despite the establishment of joint industry recovery plans. None the less, we are doing everything we can to improve the situation.

The Chairman of the Select Committee rightly raised the issue of force majeure. This has been one of my bugbears as Minister for many months now. Indeed, my enthusiasm for solving it rather overcame established procedure in terms of how we go about that. I am pleased to report to hon. Members that we have now completed assessing six full periods of GTR’s performance.

The quality of the data has significantly improved, allowing us to make swifter judgments, but because what we are discussing is a contractual obligation, GTR has the right, if it disagrees with the Department’s findings, to challenge those findings. That is what we are still stuck in at the moment. I aspire to bring that to a conclusion as rapidly as possible. I share the undoubted enthusiasm of the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside for putting that particular aspect of GTR’s performance behind us, but sadly I am not yet in a position to do that.

None the less, I am still trying to get Network Rail and the train operators to improve their focus on industry performance outputs. They are concentrating on three key workstreams to deliver improvements across the south-east. The first is the 2018 timetable specification, which will be crucial to increasing capacity across the south-east. The second is a back-to-basics approach—ensuring that trains are on time and correct processes are being followed and, in particular, focusing on the peaks in the morning and evening. We have found time and again that when something goes wrong on this network, what is called the perturbation and the consequential delays are significant.

I remember that in my first week, we had a sinkhole at Forest Hill—it no doubt delayed the hon. Member for Eltham on his way back to his constituency. That was an example of how something that simply could not be expected caused significant delays. It is really important that both the train operator and Network Rail work much more closely together to ensure that they recover from these problems when they occur, rather than allowing them to cascade throughout the timetable.

That is why it is important that the Department as a whole works with all the industry stakeholders to find new ways to measure performance that are more closely aligned with what passengers themselves experience day to day. That is why we are looking at improving our measurement of what is called right-time departure and right-time arrival. A passenger judges whether a train is on time by whether it arrives at the time said in timetable, and not within five to 10 minutes. Right-time departure is going to be a much more important figure in years to come, rather than the old-style public performance measure. I want to bring that change in as part of control period 6.

We also want to make sure that, as the hon. Member for North West Durham mentioned, there is much greater industry transparency on train service performance levels across franchises. I am absolutely committed to a much greater degree of transparency; none the less, it is a difficult process to engineer—if only because every single franchise has a slightly different set of measurements, which are contractual obligations in respect of the individual train operating company. That work is ongoing within the Department; it cannot come soon enough, in my view. I hope to make announcements in due course—as we always say in civil service parlance—and am very eager that we keep the pace going on it.

Many Members mentioned whether the company had a full complement of drivers on day one when they took over the franchise. I was not the Minister at the time, but I understand that part of the problem was that when the deal was announced it said it did have enough drivers, but, when it came to mobilisation day, some of those drivers had left to work in the freight sector. It is

entirely right and proper that we express concerns as to how that gap occurred between those two points, but we need to take a wider look at driver recruitment across the industry as a whole.

We all know that there are skills issues across the rail sector. We have an ageing workforce and a large number of workers who are about to retire. Are we doing everything we can to make sure that we are recruiting enough drivers, that driver training is an efficient process and that people have the option of going through driver training themselves—as HGV drivers do—to seek employment somewhere else? Are we making full use of all the training facilities that we now have around the country, which I am sure the Select Committee has visited? We are in close talks with the Rail Delivery Group about how we can improve driver training as a whole to improve the throughput, make sure it meets the needs in the here and now and get the numbers we need.

Many have mentioned the industrial relations problems currently on the network. I am as frustrated as everybody else at seeing yet more RMT strikes this week, but it is clear that they are now having very little impact on the network. Last Monday, 90.5% of Southern services ran. Any strike is frustrating for passengers, but I say to the RMT, “Your strikes on Southern are not having the impact you desire. It is far better that you cease industrial action and have talks with the company, rather than persisting with the strikes.”

Pat Glass: I am somewhat concerned about the complacency of that statement. Industrial action is spreading—as we heard, it is now in Merseyrail and Northern—and if the Government do not take action, it will spread right across the country.

Paul Maynard: I take the hon. Lady’s point that it is spreading, but we remain open to talking to the RMT if it calls off its industrial action. That is the blockage that stops it from having a discussion with the Government and the various train operating companies. Nobody is losing their job; nobody is losing any pay. The independent regulator has found that the system on Southern can be safe, and GTR is taking all necessary action to ensure that it is delivered safely. I welcome yesterday’s renewed agreement between ASLEF and GTR. I gather it will now go to a ballot of ASLEF members; I hope that they endorse it, and that it then ensures we can focus on delivering improved services across the Southern network.

We are working to improve the service for GTR customers and improve compensation measures. Overall, “delay repay” payments totalled £3.2 million in the last period, of which £175,000 were “delay repay 15”. We have also launched our special one-off form of compensation, the equivalent of a month’s free travel, for all Southern season ticket holders. GTR has handled almost 37,000 special claims in that regard, totalling £8.84 million in compensation. The scheme closes on 30 April 2017, and we continue to advertise it—as does GTR—in the media, on posters at all Southern stations, on electronic billboards, in customer service announcements and on Twitter.

Please be assured that I stay in touch with the situation by having regular meetings with GTR’s chief executive officer and chief operating officer to discuss all the issues. They include compensation and the implementation

and progress of all the Government-funded schemes under both the £20 million that was initially given out, and the current £300 million that will go on improving the Balcombe tunnel, removing vegetation and ensuring greater reliability.

I have five minutes remaining. As ever, how can one discuss everything about rail in the time allowed? Indeed, it is even less than that because I have to give the Select Committee Chairman a chance to have her say. I will briefly deal with accessibility, which is a mutual concern for both myself and the Labour party spokesman, the hon. Member for North West Durham.

It goes without saying that we want everybody to have equal access to transport. We have committed more than £400 million through Access for All funding and other means to improve accessibility, and train companies have to comply with the Equality Act 2010. However, I think the real picture is the fact that more and more disabled people are seeking to travel by train. The challenge for the train operating companies is getting harder with every passing month.

In the past year, we have seen 4% more sales of the disabled persons railcard and 7% more bookings under the passenger assist scheme. With more disabled people travelling, train operating companies have an ever decreasing margin for getting it wrong. I welcome the fact that the Rail Delivery Group is trying to merge the ticket reservation system and the passenger assist reservation system by December 2018, although I query whether that is soon enough and whether it could do more to bring that forward.

I remind all train operating companies that they must ensure that procedures are in place to enable disabled passengers and persons of reduced mobility to board a train in service that is under the sole operation of the driver. Where that occurs, I want to see a second person on board or on the platform to render help to those passengers who need it most. The key difference is that I do not believe that that person should be a safety-critical person. I do not think it is acceptable to have a situation where a train is cancelled and a disabled passenger cannot depart the station in the first place because there is not a second person on that train. It is fair to say that that is a small difference between myself and the hon. Lady.

Regardless of whether such assistance has been pre-booked, the principle of a “turn up and go” railway is important and must become more important in the future. It will include the requirement for all train operating companies to provide appropriately trained staff to meet their obligations. I see that as meaning more staff required on the railways, and more passenger-facing staff—not locked behind a door focusing on buttons—engaging with passengers on a regular basis. In addition, if a disabled passenger is unable to access a station, the operator must provide alternative transport—usually an accessible taxi. That will require much more cross-Government work to ensure that we have a greater supply of accessible taxis.

I am conscious that the Chairman of the Select Committee needs to say a few final words, so I shall leave my remarks there.

2.58 pm

Mrs Ellman: I thank the Committee and hon. Members present for their valuable contributions. The Minister clearly has an understanding of these issues, and I like

[Mrs Ellman]

to think that he received his training when he was a member of the Transport Committee in previous years.

Paul Maynard: Yes, I did.

Mrs Ellman: The Minister spoke about the importance of having a delivery date. It is vital that we have an early delivery date for the improvement of the passenger experience, and I assure him that we will continue to pursue that aim.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Sixth Report from the Transport Committee of Session 2016-17, The future of rail: Improving the rail passenger experience, HC 64, and the Government Response, HC 905.

Jobcentre Plus Office Closures

[MR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

3 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Jobcentre Plus office closures.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, for which there is cross-party support. With the exception of an urgent question, this is the first time that the House has managed to debate this issue since the announcement of UK-wide office closures. This is an opportunity for hon. Members to represent their constituents and to discuss the effects that the office closures will have on their constituencies. As has been indicated, there is widespread disquiet about the impact that the jobcentre closures will have. I will keep my opening remarks brief to allow hon. Members with closures in their constituencies the opportunity to inform us all of the local impacts on their constituents and communities.

The House is rightly exercised—as are many hon. Members—by the haphazard nature of the closures and the lack of evidence or rationale to support them, other than that they will save money in the short term. The lack of an adequate equality impact assessment is particularly damning. The closures have been presented by the Government as a straightforward process of rationalising the estate—that is, as sensible, considered and thought through in great detail. I would suggest otherwise, however. Far from this being a planned process to make the most of the expiry of contracts to improve services and locate them where they are needed most, it is a cost-cutting, penny-pinching cuts programme being done with poor to non-existent consideration of local conditions.

Instead of consulting appropriately with local partners and seeking to co-locate with other services to improve the effectiveness of Jobcentre Plus services, the Government have embarked upon a Google Maps, back-of-an-envelope exercise, based on achieving a targeted percentage of closures—10% overall, but 50% in Glasgow, as I am sure we will hear. Instead of enabling jobseekers to easily access other services—such as support with housing, childcare, debt management and health conditions—to help them to overcome their barriers to work, the Government have started with the basic premise of how many offices they can close and then worked backwards.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. For the record, we should remember that at least 30,000 people have lost their jobs in the civil service, and this is part of that. He spoke about the increasing workload. Citizens advice bureaux have reported that their workloads have gone up by 88%, in particular because of personal independence payment claims. Tile Hill jobcentre in my constituency is being closed, so people will have to walk miles or get buses. Importantly, a lot of them suffer from disabilities, so they will be at a disadvantage.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there have been 30,000 job losses in the civil service. As I will point out, there will be more in relation to this particular exercise, as the Government admitted in written answers to me. He is also correct about the lack of an equality impact assessment, which I will also mention.

This is a deeply flawed process, tainted by the lack of consultation with local community planning partners. In Glasgow, the Department for Work and Pensions is meant to be a key player in the process, but the closures were announced without consultation, and that is about as far from a “One Glasgow” approach as we can get. Nor to the closures do anything to support a locally agreed priority of youth employment.

Instead of respecting the terms of the Smith agreement, the UK Government announced the closures without any advance consultation with the communities that will be affected and in so doing bypassed the Scottish Government. Paragraph 58 of the Smith Commission report states:

“As the single face-to-face channel for citizens to access all benefits delivered by DWP, Jobcentre Plus will remain reserved. However, the UK and Scottish Government will identify ways to further link services through methods such as co-location wherever possible and establish more formal mechanisms to govern the Jobcentre Plus network in Scotland.”

Ministers have had to publicly admit, including in a written answer to me, that they expect at least 750 DWP staff to lose their jobs and they have refused to rule out compulsory redundancies. Jobs will disappear through this process, not only directly but indirectly. That will be less visible in cities, where jobs in call centres, delivery companies and coffee shops have replaced the thousands of admin and clerical posts that have been cut year on year for longer than I can remember. Every public sector office closure leads to money being taken out of the local economy and reduces the opportunities for young people to build a career, instead of just holding down a job. The impact on smaller cities and towns should not be underestimated. For some communities it is the equivalent of a Ravenscraig or a Linwood. Local traders are affected, small businesses fold, young people move away if they can and the local economy declines.

Finally, I want to highlight the link between the push to digital services and office closures, when it becomes much more difficult to find a person to talk to in a public office. I have spoken recently about the unfair telephone tax, where the most vulnerable are hit with call charges for contacting the DWP and other government services. The DWP is a long way from being digital by default. A vicious circle is emerging, whereby access to advice and support is being blocked to those who need it most. Every Member here can testify that our offices are now providing more and more of that support through our constituency casework. Widespread jobcentre closures will only increase the workload on other staff in the DWP, giving them less time to spend on individuals.

I will now leave it to other hon. Members to voice their concerns and no doubt vent their frustrations about this botched and flawed process.

3.6 pm

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens). I congratulate him on securing the debate and, like him, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us this opportunity today.

Lewisham jobcentre, which is based in my constituency, is one of the jobcentres earmarked for closure. In my borough the unemployment rate is higher than average. We have 3,100 people in receipt of either jobseeker's allowance or universal credit, who have a reason to visit the jobcentre once a fortnight. Another 15,000 people in the borough of Lewisham receive employment and support allowance or income support. Although they visit the jobcentre less frequently, it is estimated that between 100 and 200 of them use the jobcentre in Rushey Green every week.

At the moment the jobcentre is located in the heart of the borough of Lewisham, on a busy street between Lewisham and Catford. It is easily accessible on a number of different bus routes and from five different overground railway stations. The Department for Work and Pensions proposes to close that much needed, busy jobcentre in my constituency and relocate it to another office that it has in Forest Hill. That office is small, and although there is a proposal to expand into some of the space available in that building, my fear is that we will squeeze staff from the main jobcentre in Lewisham into unsuitable, smaller premises in Forest Hill that are less accessible.

I know that the DWP is exploring taking up some space in a council-owned building called Eros House. I ask the Minister to do everything he can to ensure that the local presence of the DWP is able to pursue that option. It is no good sending people down to Bromley from Lewisham or trying to run those services from a constrained site in Forest Hill. It is vital that we can have that easily accessible location at Eros House in Catford.

Let me take a minute to reflect on how we got here. The lease arrangements for the DWP have been in place for 30 years and they are coming to an end. For the last six months an agent has been looking to secure space in a central Lewisham location, but has been unable to find any. I do not know whether the process should have started sooner, so that consideration could have been given to the new developments in the borough of Lewisham to ensure that appropriate space could be found. We find ourselves in this situation partly because of the Government's changes to permitted development rights and the planning system in the last few years. The owner of the building that the jobcentre is currently located in has decided to convert that office building to residential under permitted development rights, and there is a real problem sourcing office space in central locations, particularly in London.

I am concerned about the impact on people who rely on the jobcentre to access the help, advice and support that the hon. Member for Glasgow South West talked about. As politicians, we spend a lot of time talking about how much money is paid to individuals in benefit and less time on exactly what support is provided to help people back into work. It goes without saying that people need to be able to get to that help and support easily. I know that the consultation process and equality impact assessment might not kick in for some jobcentres in London because of the issue of being within 20 minutes to the next jobcentre, but anyone who has sat on a bus on the south circular in south London trying to get from one place to the next will realise that 20 minutes in theory is not always 20 minutes in practice.

I agree entirely with what the hon. Gentleman said about the move to digital services. Some of the people in my constituency who use the jobcentre frequently

[Heidi Alexander]

will want to see somebody face to face. At my own advice surgeries every fortnight I see between 25 and 40 people, which is testament to the fact that people want to speak to somebody directly.

We need to provide tailored support to individuals trying to get back into work. I was interested to read an article in the *Evening Standard* on 31 January by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about the disability unemployment rate in London, in which he wrote:

“The gap between the number of disabled people in work compared with the employment rate of non-disabled people in London is around 28 percentage points—a figure that is frankly unacceptable in 2017.”

I agree with the Secretary of State about that, but it is a bit rich for him then to say:

“We’re building a locally-based system that works with businesses in the area and can offer people intense support”.

I think that is a bit rich, because in London the DWP is proposing to close one in three jobcentres: 22 of the capital’s 73 existing jobcentres. Of the 22 that are closing, 15 are located in boroughs with a higher than average claimant count, and, as we know, London has a higher than average claimant count than the country as a whole.

I am also concerned that the rate of unemployment among young people, the disabled and those from black and minority ethnic communities is higher in London than the national average. In fact, Office for National Statistics data from last September showed that BME unemployment in London stood at 9%. Ministers should review the criteria they use to determine the closures.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am listening with great interest to the case that my hon. Friend is making. One of the puzzling things about the closure programme is that the Government also want to increase the workload of jobcentres and want some people to go more frequently. They also want to introduce conditionality for people who are in work. It is difficult to see how those additional tasks can be managed at the same time as shutting down so many jobcentres.

Heidi Alexander: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend, who has huge expertise and experience in this area. Ministers need to review the criteria that they use to determine which closures are subject to full public consultation processes. We have not yet seen an equality impact assessment of the closures, which is absolutely critical in a London context, for the reasons that I have set out.

I urge the Minister to have an eye to the future as opposed to the past. The Government might pat themselves on the back over employment rates—we could have a discussion another time about the nature of the employment that has been created in recent years—but they need to think about what might happen over the next couple of years. I detect some complacency among Ministers about Brexit and its economic consequences. In my constituency, we are heavily dependent on jobs in the financial services industry and in professional services that support industry such as cleaning, security and employment agencies. Some of my low-paid constituents work in retail and hospitality.

I am concerned about the prospects for employment should we see the movement of financial services from London to other cities in Europe. If we are likely to see an increasing caseload in jobcentres, allied to the issues that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) has set out about how individuals’ interaction with jobcentres is changing, then the Government’s proposal is short-sighted and could have serious long-term consequences for people’s ability to get back into employment. I ask the Minister to review the closures across London and to look in detail at what provision can be made in central Lewisham for my own jobcentre.

3.16 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I certainly welcome the opportunity to speak in today’s debate, not least because it is the only time that anyone from Inverclyde will be afforded the opportunity to have a say on the proposed closure of the Port Glasgow jobcentre.

As the Minister will already be aware, the decision to close one of my constituency’s two jobcentres was not put out to consultation because the distance between the Greenock and Port Glasgow jobcentres is less than three miles. By my reckoning it is 2.6 miles between the two buildings as the crow flies, and 2.84 miles if one measures the actual route that one would need to take along the road network. For the sake of an additional 250 metres it is hard to understand why the UK Government would not consult on this decision so that service users could outline how the changes affect them.

Or maybe the UK Government simply do not care what service users think, otherwise the obvious course of action would have been to undertake a consultation on all closures. By setting up the consultation criteria in the way that they have, the UK Government have manufactured the result they wanted: namely, only 30 jobcentres out of the 183 affected by the changes will be subject to consultation. We all know that the reality of this situation is that the closure decision has absolutely nothing to do with providing a Government service. Rather, it is part of the UK Government’s goal of selling £4.5 billion-worth of Government land and property by 2020-21.

Over the course of the previous Parliament, the DWP estate shrunk by 17%, with the Government intent on reducing the size by a further 20%. I fully appreciate the need for any Government to spend public funds wisely, but the decision to slash the number of jobcentres will most definitely have a negative impact on my constituents. The most obvious consideration is the additional travel costs that service users will face in getting to their appointments. This will barely register as small change for a UK Government Minister or indeed an MP, but it is an unwanted additional expense for someone already struggling on a low income.

Constituents will also be burdened with increased travel times, which in turn puts them at an increased risk of being sanctioned under the DWP’s draconian and uncompromising rules. Again, the Minister may say, “It’s only three miles’ difference. What’s the big deal?”

One issue that may have been identified had a local consultation taken place is that the only main road between Greenock and Port Glasgow is liable to flooding at certain times of the year. It may block traffic once or

twice a year, but one missed appointment is all it takes to be sanctioned. I want to say that I support the staff of the Port Glasgow jobcentre, who are fulfilling their support roles as best they can with the guidance handed to them from ministerial level. I am aware that they have their own reservations about the closure and how it will affect their clients. In the words of Mark Serwotka, the General Secretary of the Public and Commercial Services Union:

“Jobcentres provide a lifeline for unemployed people and forcing them to travel further is not only unfair, it undermines support to get them back to work.”

A report from the Disability Benefits Consortium found that 93% of respondents to a survey of service users thought that the process for applying for PIP was stressful: 80% experienced difficulties in completing the claim form, while 82% felt that the application process had a negative impact on their health. Will Minister explain how closing one of my constituency’s two jobcentres will improve that experience for service users?

We can highlight the lack of consultation and the specific practical issues surrounding this closure. My fear, however, is that the issue highlights, once again, a more general problem—the UK Government’s complete lack of compassion or genuine concern for vulnerable people. Instead they pursue spreadsheet politics where the only thing that matters is the bottom line.

I hope that the debate will not conclude with a meaningless regurgitation of the Government’s policy. At the very least the Minister should have the intellectual honesty to come to the Chamber and admit that the experience of service users is not a consideration in the closure decision. My constituents deserve that. I support the calls for closures to be suspended until a wider consultation is conducted, so that we can properly assess the impact of the decision on all our constituents.

3.21 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for securing today’s important debate through the Backbench Business Committee; I also thank all those who supported the application, and the Members who are participating today.

We are back again: this is the third full debate on the issue in which I have participated. I am rather disappointed that many of the questions and points raised in the first two are yet to be addressed by the Department for Work and Pensions. Parliamentary questions tabled by me and my colleagues have received poor-quality answers. At least one thing can be said of the Department: it is consistent in its handling of the matter. Right from the start, it has been a shambles. As we have heard, after the news broke in the press that half Glasgow’s jobcentres were to be axed, it took seven hours for the Department to write to the affected MPs and inform us. It did not see fit to inform us or even consult us; nor did it bother to speak with the devolved Administration in Scotland.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West said, paragraph 58 of the Smith commission report states that

“the UK and Scottish Government will identify ways to further link services through methods such as co-location wherever possible and establish more formal mechanisms to govern the Jobcentre Plus network in Scotland.”

The report emphasised that the Scottish Government would have greater responsibility, jointly with the UK Government, in relation to Jobcentre Plus. Yet that did not happen. Not only were the Scottish Government kept in the dark; I have discovered through written parliamentary questions that the Secretary of State for Scotland was not even informed of the specific plans for the jobcentre closures in Glasgow before the information was made public. Why were neither the devolved Administration at Holyrood nor the Scotland Office made aware of DWP plans? Was it arrogance or ignorance that led the DWP to act in such a cavalier fashion, with such disregard for those alongside whom it is supposed to be working constructively? I will be kind and say it was ignorance of the needs of the people of Scotland.

The Department will have to listen to the views of those who rely on the services, and meet the needs of the people of Scotland. It needs to understand that the impact of the closures is part of an intricate local picture. I wonder whether the Minister knows, for instance, of the issues affecting Cambuslang in my constituency, where the Main Street jobcentre is due to close next year. Is the Department aware that Royal Bank of Scotland closed its doors there just months ago, that local traders have subsequently suffered a reported 30% drop in footfall, or that the two remaining banks, TSB and Clydesdale, have announced that they too are to close in the coming months? Has it considered at all the cumulative impact that those closures will have along with the closure of a major resource such as the jobcentre? I am guessing the answer to all of those questions is no. Perhaps if Ministers had bothered to consult me, they would be better informed.

The Department will have seriously to make up for its former ignorance by consulting service users, local stakeholders—such as the local Church of Scotland minister Neil Glover, who has spoken out against the jobcentre closure and described it as a moral issue—and elected representatives, and by working with the Scottish Government. Scottish Employability and Training Minister Jamie Hepburn has written to and met Ministers from the Department, not only to express grave concerns but to seek clarity on the issue. He has requested that UK Ministers meet benefit recipients and others from the communities that will be affected by the proposals.

It is vital that the UK Government should consult properly and consider all options, including co-location opportunities. The Scottish Government are proactively exploring opportunities to co-locate jobcentre services with local partners to ease the impact on individuals and communities. The Department should do likewise, and ensure that the Scottish Government are fully engaged with the process.

As I have said, this is the third debate on the subject. It is frustrating that we have to bring up the same issues again. I ask the Minister today to take seriously the points that have been raised—I shall go further, and ask for a guarantee that the jobcentre in Cambuslang will not close its doors. If he decides that it should, at the very least we need a presence in Cambuslang to ensure that claimants will not have to travel further, with increased travel costs, all the way to Rutherglen. My constituents deserve better than the approach taken by the UK Government so far.

3.27 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I, too, offer thanks and congratulations to the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens).

When I first saw the announcement about the closure of the Eastern Avenue jobcentre in my constituency I was relatively agnostic about it. Given that there were to be no compulsory redundancies and it is a relatively short distance into town, I did not think it would be that much of a problem. If the Government could make a case that centres needed to be closed and services improved in certain areas, I was prepared to listen to it. However, having read the further announcement, followed the plan's progress and, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) said, participated in several debates, I have been horrified that no justification has been given for the decisions at all. None of the work—the assessments or gathering and publication of evidence—that one would expect ahead of a decision of this kind has been done; no such work informed the pitiful consultation process that has taken place so far.

It is claimed on the Government website that the decisions are due to the claimant count reducing and the number of digital interactions increasing, and the fact that 20% of the DWP estate is underutilised. To take those one by one, it may be the case that the claimant count is falling, but I do not think that anyone could tell jobcentre staff anywhere in the UK that their workload has reduced in the past seven years and is likely to continue to reduce—not least because of the roll-out of universal credit, which is incredibly complex. As has been mentioned, universal credit will require more interactions than in the past, including face-to-face interactions. For the first time, working people will have to attend interviews at jobcentres; and from April lone parents will be obliged to see work coaches once their child reaches three years old, rather than five, which is the current threshold. It is highly unlikely that interactions and workload will fall in the coming years.

As to digital interactions, the ward in which Eastern Avenue jobcentre is to close is one of the most deprived in the country; 74% of people there are in the 10% most deprived in the country. Many of them do not use the internet at all, let alone have the capacity to apply online—there are very high levels of digital exclusion. Ironically, the council is currently doing some work on digital inclusion, commissioned by the DWP, around Eastern Avenue jobcentre; that work will have to be halted. Again, there does not seem to have been any recognition or cognisance of the impact that the cuts will have on that work.

Whether or not the estate is underutilised at Eastern Avenue—or indeed at Cavendish Court, where the Government are expecting claimants to move to—is open to question. I have been to both jobcentres and there certainly does not seem to be any underutilised space—Cavendish Court in particular is bursting at the seams—but we do not know, because the Government have not published any of the evidence and do not seem to have done any of the work behind it. I met the manager for my region, North, East Yorkshire and the Humber, after the Minister advised me that that was the best way to proceed. It was not her fault, but I am afraid the manager had absolutely nothing to add to what the Government had already published.

As other Members have said, there has clearly been no equality impact assessment. Nor has there been any assessment of how many employment and support allowance or income support claimants are currently using Eastern Avenue and will therefore now have to go to the city centre. The Government do not know how many claimants the closure is going to affect, which is basic information that we would expect to inform the consultation process. There was no information on how much the Government would save by closing Eastern Avenue. That is important, because the regional manager admitted that money would have to be spent on the city centre jobcentre to increase its capacity and accommodate all the extra claimants, so we do not know whether the closure will actually save the taxpayer a single penny.

No plans have been put in place and no work has been done on whether claimants who currently come under Woodhouse jobcentre, but are looked after by Eastern Avenue if they need group sessions or screened appointments, can be accommodated by Cavendish Court, or whether more money will have to be spent to develop the space at Woodhouse to conduct those sessions. Eastern Avenue currently conducts 17 screened appointments a week. That is a considerable amount of time to dedicate to claimants, and we have absolutely no idea whether Cavendish Court can accommodate them.

There was a paltry four-week consultation, although we were lucky to get even that in Sheffield; as we have heard today, many jobcentres throughout the country did not. The Government have treated Parliament and, worse, the public with disdain by refusing to justify their decision and publish the evidential basis behind it. How can Ministers possibly ask us to support the decision if the information is not available? Now that the consultation has closed, before the Government publish their final decision I ask the Minister to publish the DWP's people and estates programme and any of the other impact assessments that were presumably conducted internally. I really hope that the Government have not taken the approach, which they seem to have taken in the past, of just pointing to jobcentres on Google Maps and deciding, seemingly haphazardly and arbitrarily, which centres to close.

I particularly want to press the Minister on why the Government have rowed back on their original commitment not to close jobcentres in particularly deprived areas. Finally, I urge him not to rely solely on Google Maps for travel times, as he recently admitted to doing in answer to a written question from me. *[Interruption.]* He is looking confused, but he confirmed to me that his Department used Google Maps for travel times.

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): As one of the methods.

Louise Haigh: Yes. The Department's introduction to the announcement confidently asserted that the travel time between Eastern Avenue and the city centre would be 24 minutes. That analysis was based on Google Maps. A claimant who currently goes to Eastern Avenue did a travel journal for me of his journeys from Eastern Avenue to Cavendish Court on eight separate occasions, and not one of them took 24 minutes. The average journey time between the two jobcentres is 44 minutes.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Lady is giving some fascinating facts. Does she know that the exercise with Google Maps in Glasgow used information based on bus services that are no longer operational?

Louise Haigh: That is another interesting point that shows the problems with using Google Maps without consulting the local authority or the local passenger transport executive, as any rational person would expect the Government to do. On average, the journey between Eastern Avenue and the city centre takes 44 minutes. The maximum time it took Antony was 63 minutes.

There is clear consensus today that the evidence base and the impact assessments need to be published before the final decision is made. I would really like the Minister to reflect today on the long-term impact of removing a respected community service from incredibly deprived areas—Arbourthorne and Manor Top are some of the most deprived in the country—that have relied on them for so long.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): The three Front-Bench speakers need about eight minutes each, and I want to leave two minutes for the mover of the motion to wind up.

3.35 pm

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for securing the debate, and all right hon. and hon. Members who contributed.

It is vital that we stand up for workers' rights in these times of austerity. It is critical that the Government engage with unions in a meaningful way and include them in the determination and resolution of any appropriate issue such as office closures. My hon. Friends have covered the lack of interface with the Scottish Government; their points were well made and I will not repeat them. My constituency of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill is affected by the cuts to jobcentre locations, as are the constituencies of many other Members present. I commend them for their attendance; appropriately, given the debate's cross-party nature, we have adopted a collective response.

Coatbridge is a local DWP back office that employs about 250 people and is facing closure as a result of these cuts. I have been in contact with union representatives about the closure since the announcement was made and I recently attended the annual general meeting of the local branch of the Public and Commercial Services Union to discuss the impact of the closure on its members and on the local community. I was particularly concerned to be informed by the union that the DWP's announcement was made without any consultation with the workers or the union at all. The DWP did not inform me of the lack of consultation when I was contacted about the closure. Although the DWP has stated that the closure will not involve any job losses, it has indicated that the jobs in question will be moved to alternate locations in central Glasgow or Motherwell, both of which are approximately half an hour's drive away—and that is if we assume no traffic delays.

Coatbridge is a community filled with young families. Many people base decisions about who they work for on the location of their potential workplace: they choose

to work in locations that allow them to drop their children at school in the morning or be near an elderly or poorly relative. There is also the issue of additional travel costs for the predominantly local staff to and from Glasgow and Motherwell—again, colleagues have covered that well, so I will not repeat the points they made. For many workers affected by the cut, the loss of that essential proximity to home, the additional travel and the associated costs may mean that they need to seek alternative employment. I can hardly see how a Government can describe themselves as pro-family when they put so many in such a precarious position.

The union members I spoke to were concerned about the dilution and inevitable reduction in the quality of services provided to service users that the cuts will cause, as was well articulated by my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan). The closure will affect not only current employees and their families but local businesses, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) articulated well. The DWP facility that faces closure is just off the main street in Coatbridge and, like many town centres throughout the country, it suffers from massive reductions in footfall, and subsequently business, for high street retailers and service providers. It seemed as if things could not get any worse for our main street retailers, but the facility's relocation out of Coatbridge town centre will be yet another blow for the businesses in and around it and for the other businesses, such as childcare businesses, restaurants and takeaways, that support the local workforce in my constituency and the surrounding constituencies.

Unfortunately, the announced closure is only one of a decades-long series of ideologically driven cuts to services in Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill from a London-centric UK Government. It gives the lie to the claim we hear from London about caring conservatism. Nothing could be further from the truth. I urge the Minister to focus on the decentralisation of services if he and his Government are truly serious about a more inclusive Britain for all. Like my colleagues, I ask the Minister to reconsider, to halt the closures and to review them after proper assessments and a proper consultation process have been carried out.

3.39 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and thank him for securing this debate. I want to speak against the impending closure of Phoenix House in Barrow, which is not a jobcentre but a back-office benefits processing centre. As I will outline, the 80 people in that centre perform an important service to people throughout the United Kingdom. As I said to the Minister, who was good enough to make himself available in the days immediately after the shock announcement, closing the centre could have damaging consequences for the people whom we as a country, the state and his Department are supposed to be serving.

In contrast with some of the tone of the debate so far, I am not questioning the Minister's integrity. Everything that I saw of him in the time before he became a Minister suggests that he is genuinely committed to the field, in which he spent a considerable amount of time

[*John Woodcock*]

before being promoted to a ministerial role. However, he is presiding over a process that is simply not acceptable, for many reasons that have been outlined in this debate. This is an important opportunity for him to listen and make amends.

I imagine that the Minister will recall our brief meeting. Having worked as an adviser in the Department where he now serves, I have some experience of how it can sometimes drive forward with a programme while treating ministerial direction—which, frankly, it sometimes seems to take as advice—as wholly unwelcome, although I do not expect him to confirm that in his remarks. I have spoken with his Department. Mentioning the conduct of civil servants is not something I do lightly, but I was genuinely taken aback when I went to see the Minister and the civil servant who was there to support him did not even know what benefit was processed in Barrow. That is lacking in and of itself when we are talking about 80 people in my constituency who are losing their jobs. As the Minister for Employment, he will have some understanding that when skilled office jobs are eliminated in a geographically remote constituency such as Barrow, they have little prospect of being replaced by something else, and people cannot realistically travel to another place two or more hours away. I expected that civil servant to know what those people did, at least.

Due to the nature of the benefit, closing Phoenix House and taking the facilities somewhere else in the country, inevitably employing new people, will do damage to the service provided. The centre processes industrial injuries disablement benefit. The team say proudly that they have more than 100 years' experience between them of processing that benefit. Due to that build-up of expertise, the Barrow team has taken part in a process that has reduced the processing time for that benefit from 175 days to 33 days. That is an achievement and welcome in itself, but we must also take into account who receives the benefit. It goes to people who have developed terrible conditions. Many of them, such as those suffering from the likes of asbestosis, are terminally ill due to negligence in past decades. That is why they have been given compensation in the form of the benefit. The whole point of focusing on driving down the time that it takes for them to get it is that it makes the difference between them receiving it while they are still alive and receiving it after they have died.

When I made the case to the Minister, he told me that he and the Government were not in the business of reversing that progress and going back to the days when, unfortunately, many people died before they were given the benefit, which is itself inadequate compensation for having their lives taken away but is nevertheless important both financially and as recognition that they were wronged in their employment. I put it to him again that reversing progress is exactly what will happen if that function is taken away from Phoenix House and put elsewhere in the country.

The Minister will know by now, I hope, that it takes 12 to 18 months to train people in even a basic level of competence, and the people at Phoenix House have much more than that due to the experience that they have built up. I am coming to the end of my time; I am pleased that we are giving him ample time to address all the diverse issues. I hope that he can address the plight

of the staff members at Phoenix House, who are campaigning hard. They have set up a petition, and I supported their march in Barrow on Saturday. They are fighting for their jobs, but they are also fighting for the service that they give to the rest of the nation, and I hope that he takes it seriously in his response.

3.47 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Walker. I congratulate and thank my constituency neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for securing this debate. After many—possibly more than 100—written questions, urgent questions, debates in Westminster Hall and points of order that are not really points of order, I salute his indefatigability in pursuing this issue.

I also thank the PCS Scotland union for the excellent job that it has done assisting Members of Parliament throughout the country, and particularly in Glasgow, where we heard the rather unwelcome news just before Christmas that the Government intend to reduce the jobcentre estate by half, from 16 jobcentres to eight, two of which—the Castlemilk and Langside jobcentres—are in my constituency.

I hate to say it, but having spoken in the two previous debates, met the Minister along with colleagues and taken part in the urgent questions, there is not much new for me to say. However, as you will know, Mr Walker, the Speaker reminds us that repetition is not a vice in this House, so I will repeat some of it. The Castlemilk jobcentre serves a community that was once more populous than the city of Perth and has some of the most deprived neighbourhoods anywhere in the United Kingdom. It sits in the Braes shopping centre in the centre of Castlemilk, and it is, I think, the only serious anchor tenant there. If the jobcentre goes, it will create big problems.

However, that should not be the only reason for it to stay. The other reason is that closure will have an impact on those who use the jobcentre. I hate to say it, but to return to the point made earlier by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), this plan has been designed by Google Maps. Like the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), I do not want to mention civil servants on the public record, but when we met senior civil servants from the Department for Work and Pensions in Glasgow before Christmas, I jokingly asked if they had worked it out using Google Maps, expecting the answer to be, "Don't be so ridiculous, Mr McDonald; we would never do such a thing." However, the response I got was, "Yes, we've used Google Maps," which has bus services that no longer exist and does not take into account travel times as far as traffic goes.

Langside jobcentre serves the second most densely populated council ward anywhere in Scotland, and it serves a population of people who live in private lets and who often have quite precarious working conditions, in temporary jobs, on zero-hours contracts and with relatively low pay, and whose employment is in many cases anything but secure.

I would ask the Minister why, despite several genuine and friendly invitations, he has not taken any time at all to visit any of the jobcentres in Glasgow that he wishes

to close. I do not know what he thinks will happen to him if he comes, but I can assure him that either I or one of my hon. Friends from the city of Glasgow will look after him. He will be okay. Even at this late stage, I implore him to visit a jobcentre in Glasgow to hear what the staff and the users have to say.

Stephen Timms: Will any of the hon. Gentleman's constituents face what a number of my constituents in East Ham in London will face once our local jobcentre closes, which is a doubling of their public transport fares in order to get to the replacement jobcentre?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Absolutely. With the Castlemilk jobcentre, all the people who use it will effectively have to use what the Department calls the Newlands jobcentre—it is called that, but it is actually in Pollokshaws, which is even further away than Newlands. All the people from Castlemilk who have to use that jobcentre will have an 8-mile round trip to get there and back. At the minute, no matter where someone is in Castlemilk, they can walk to the jobcentre in, at the most, maybe seven minutes, and that is for a perfectly able-bodied person.

I do not see the need to put those kinds of barriers in people's way for trying to access a service that has been in their community for a long, long time. The Department seems to think that people can get from Castlemilk to the jobcentre in Pollokshaws in under 30 minutes—I think that is what it has said. I say, "Well, good luck with that," because, having gone around the constituency countless times over the years I have lived in Glasgow, which is my entire adult life, I certainly have never been able to make that journey in just over 20 minutes.

However, I will come to my final point, which is on the consultation. We had to drag the Government to publish their consultation on the Glasgow jobcentres online; they had no intention of doing that. *[Interruption.]* The Minister can shake his head or gesticulate in any way he wants, but they had no intention of putting that on the Department for Work and Pensions website. It was welcome that they did, and it was also welcome that they extended the consultation for around two weeks. I am not sure what the Minister is so flabbergasted by, but I look forward to hearing about it none the less.

It was quite remiss of the Government not to take the time to write to every single person who would have been affected by these closures. When someone goes to the jobcentre to register, there is not a bit of information that the staff do not get from them, so the Government could have made it easy for those for whom this closure would be a big issue to take part in the consultation. Rather than just having fliers and putting up a couple of posters in jobcentres, the Government could have sent a consultation response form directly to their houses, or by email, rather than relying on Members of Parliament or members of the public—I had several people willing to do this, even though they were not exactly happy about it—standing outside jobcentres and informing people that they were going to close, which was the first time they had heard about it. In my view, it was quite wrong of Ministers not to inform MPs about this matter and for us to have to read about it in the press, but that is nothing in comparison with members of the public who use the jobcentres finding out from a stranger in the street campaigning outside a jobcentre.

The Government have handled the consultation poorly; however, I would like to hear what the responses to the consultation contain. I would also like to hear how many responses there have been and to know when the announcement on closures will be made. My understanding is that we can expect an announcement towards the end of March—that is, around about the time that article 50 is in full-blown scale, so it will perhaps be a good time to bury bad news.

Nevertheless, I ask the Minister this quite sincerely: can he commit to making an oral statement on the Floor of the House and to not sneaking this news out in a written statement, a press release, or in some fashion that avoids proper parliamentary scrutiny? If he gives me nothing else today—U-turns are quite fashionable this week, but I am not sure he will do another—I ask him to commit at the very least to making a full oral statement on the Floor of the House, so that Members can scrutinise the decision further.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I am going to call the Minister no later than 4.18 pm. If the Opposition Front Benchers want me to call him earlier than that—he has got lots of notes—that is entirely up to them.

3.55 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Walker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing this critical debate.

As the Member of Parliament for West Dunbartonshire, I would like to put on the record the fact that the Alexandria jobcentre in the Vale of Leven in my constituency has been proposed for closure. Colleagues from all parties have made strong cases for the reversal of the UK Government's proposals to close a number of jobcentres in their respective constituencies. I hope the Minister will take their points on board. I feel for the Minister, because I am led to believe that there will be a closure in his own constituency, which must be going down like a lead balloon.

Although I agree with the arguments put forward by colleagues, there are special circumstances that set the Alexandria jobcentre apart. The catchment area shares similar characteristics with others earmarked for closure. There are high levels of deprivation and unemployment, which, as in other urban areas, must be taken into consideration. The Alexandria jobcentre differs, in that it serves a population that is not only urban but suburban, in the true sense, and a rural community, which results in a set of unique challenges for those living in those communities, especially given that the area includes the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park boundary.

An argument put forward by the DWP to support its proposal is that it is now easier to access jobcentre services, whether over the phone, online or in person. Let me take those in order. For citizens living in rural areas, the practical challenges are many. People whose line connections depend on weather conditions, which in my constituency are temperamental at best, do not have easy access to services by phone, as the Department argues. Given BT Openreach's dubious record in elements of the rural sections of my constituency, there are difficulties in online connectivity.

Chris Stephens: Is my hon. Friend aware that, although the Department publicly suggests that 0845 numbers are no longer in operation, claimants can phone an 0845 number, which costs 55p a minute?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: It is an outrage. My hon. Friend highlights something that makes a mockery of the suggestion that this will save money.

Those who do not have an internet connection because their area has not yet had substantial investment in broadband connectivity—in my area we need investment in the copper wiring, never mind new fibre—cannot access the services online as easily as the Department presumes. Many urban, suburban and rural citizens simply cannot afford to sign up to an internet provider. That also holds true in relation to phone and mobile operators.

Reducing the number of jobcentres and moving those services to a central location—in my constituency, down to Dumbarton—will make it more difficult for citizens to access those so-called local services in person. It will result in longer journeys at a greater cost to those who are already struggling to pay the bills, and it may exacerbate health conditions. In certain parts of my constituency in the winter, it is not an easy journey, especially for people coming from the national park end. To suggest that those individuals can claim back any cost incurred through the longer journey misses the bigger point. They are already struggling financially, and the lack of awareness from the Government and specifically the Department is quite unnerving.

To ensure the best service for citizens, all interested parties must be involved. I welcome West Dunbartonshire Council's proactive cross-party approach to tackling these issues in the best way for our constituents. I urge the Minister in the strongest possible terms to engage constructively with the local authority to retain those local services. In the light of that, I ask him to draw its attention to the policy, because there are different policy frameworks across the UK. For Scotland, I urge the Department to read the report by the Christie commission on the future delivery of public services, which shows how that delivery might be achieved with community planning partners. The clue is in the name: it is about partners and partnership.

Unfortunately, my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) cannot be here today for personal reasons, and she asked me to raise a few points on her behalf. The Department announced that it was relocating 300 jobs out of her constituency into the city of Glasgow, with no consideration of the impact on the local economy. In addition, no consideration has been given to how existing staff will be affected and how the travel time will impact on their lives. That could be a major factor that may force some existing staff to consider taking redundancy, as any move may be impractical. Why is the DWP abandoning a purpose-built office to take on a new lease?

To sum up, I hope that the Minister and his civil servants will take on board the valid concerns expressed by all Members and be proactive in responding, in particular by recognising the opportunities for co-location and partnership working for local services in local communities. I am sure I speak on behalf of all Members in praising the staff and those from the PCS union. I have been meeting them to ensure that this is kept to the fore as a major issue for us to debate.

4.1 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing this debate. He spoke passionately about the haphazard nature of the closures, and described it as a Google Maps exercise done on the back of an envelope. He also spoke about the loss of jobs and the impact on the local economy. It has been a very important debate, even though we have already had several debates on this issue.

We have had some excellent contributions, particularly from my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), who made a measured speech about the impact on her constituents and the Government's complacency on the economic consequences of Brexit for the financial sector, on which many of her constituents rely. The hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) spoke about practical problems, such as flood risk and the impact that might have on people being sanctioned. The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) talked about the cumulative impact in her constituency of other closures, such as those of local banks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) represents one of the most deprived areas of the country. She asked the Minister why we should be asked to support the measure, given that we have not been given the evidence base or any impact assessment. My hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) made some very good points about the remote geographical location of his constituency and the loss of expertise for Jobcentre Plus. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) spoke about the doubling of public transport fares for people in his constituency. There were also contributions by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell).

Many questions still need to be answered. The Government appear to believe that the current levels of employment and the introduction of universal credit mean that more than one in 10 Jobcentre Plus offices can be closed, regardless of the impact on the local community. According to House of Commons Library analysis, 33% of jobcentres in London, 18% of jobcentres in Scotland and 16% of jobcentres in the north-west will be lost at a time when communities are already under real pressure due to seven years of Tory austerity.

Jobcentre Plus faces considerable challenges in the immediate future. From this April, it will play a much greater role in directly providing employment support when new referrals to the Work programme cease. From the end of this year, the Work programme and Work Choice will be replaced by the Work and Health programme. Most people claiming JSA are currently asked to take part in the Work programme, while Work Choice provides specialist employment support for disabled people.

Margaret Ferrier: Does the shadow Minister agree that it is about not only the expertise of jobcentre staff in carrying out their role, but the rapport built up between them and the clients? That is even more important when dealing with those with mental health issues, where continuity is crucial.

Margaret Greenwood: I thank the hon. Lady for that; she makes a good point.

Eligibility for the Work and Health programme will be much more restricted than the programmes it replaces. It will be open to certain disabled people and to people who have been unemployed for two years or more. In the light of that, the Employment Related Services Association estimates that as many as 45,000 fewer disabled people will have access to specialist employment support in every remaining year of this Parliament. Employment support for almost everyone else will be provided by Jobcentre Plus, including many disabled people with specialist needs.

How does the programme of jobcentre closures square with the Government's aim of meeting their manifesto commitment of halving the disability employment gap? The longer and more complicated journeys to jobcentres as a result of the closures will particularly affect disabled people and people with caring responsibilities. Why has the DWP not yet published an equality impact assessment to analyse the effect of the closures on claimants and the local community?

More difficult journeys also increase the risk of claimants being sanctioned by staff for being late for or missing appointments. Will DWP issue guidance that, when considering sanctions, jobcentres should take account of increased journey times due to closures? There is already a backlog of sanctions, which in some cases is leading to money being withdrawn from claimants months after non-compliance, even though claimants may in the meantime have done what they were asked to do.

The roll-out of universal credit is continuing and will also present additional challenges for Jobcentre Plus. Jobcentres are having to do a huge range of things: provide careers advice to schools; deliver the new youth obligation under universal credit, which involves much more intensive support for 18 to 21-year-olds for the first six months of their claim; assess the viability of businesses for self-employed people claiming universal credit; and extend services to the partners of jobseekers, because universal credit applies to a household, so for the first time a spouse or partner of a claimant can be asked to attend a jobcentre to discuss work, even if they themselves have not made a claim or are in work. In future, jobcentres will also have to operate in-work conditionality under universal credit. In other words, people on low incomes who are working will be required to increase their earnings or risk being sanctioned—another first.

There is growing evidence that the supposed six-week wait for payment at the start of a universal credit claim is much longer in some areas, leading to people being in arrears with their rent and building up debts. Will the Minister assure us that the DWP has fully taken into account the need to tackle existing delays in processing claims in its plans for closures? Furthermore, universal credit is being rolled out at a rate of five jobcentres per month, rising to 30 jobcentres per month from July and 50 jobcentres after September, but by the end of last year the Department was ready to announce a dramatic programme of closures at the very time it was going to speed up the roll-out of universal credit.

Universal credit is, of course, designed for claims to be made and managed online. The Minister, in his statement of 26 January, highlighted that "99.6% of applicants for Universal Credit full service submitted their claim online."

As has been said by many Members, however, not everyone is confident of using IT, and many people rely on access to a computer in local libraries to do so—and libraries, too, are under threat from the cuts to local authority funding, with which we are all so familiar.

Just because a claim is made online does not mean that it can then be completely managed online. When there is a problem, a claimant may have little choice but to ring the DWP helpline or to go to a jobcentre to resolve it. We know from parliamentary questions last year that many claimants are spending long periods on the phone to DWP's universal credit helpline.

The DWP is not alone in closing offices. HMRC is also planning to close all its 170 offices nationwide by 2020, replacing them with only 13 regional centres. Employment support works best when people have a good relationship with their adviser or work coach and it is tailored to a claimant's specific needs. I am concerned that the system is already buckling under increasing pressure and that, in closing so many jobcentres at the same time as speeding up the roll-out of universal credit, the Government are simply asking the impossible of work coaches, who are at the heart of our system of employment support.

It is vital that we have a reliable social security system that is there for any one of us should we fall on hard times. Those closures look set to erode the infrastructure in place to deliver that system without the Government's even having made an equality impact assessment. I urge the Government to think again.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I remind him that we would like Mr Stephens to have two minutes at the end. Would the Minister mind sitting down by 4.28 pm?

4.8 pm

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): As always, it is a great pleasure to see you chairing the debate, Mr Walker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing it and giving us the chance to debate these matters again. I think at one point he suggested that this was the first chance that we had had to debate—

Chris Stephens: For clarity, this is the first time we have had a chance to debate the issue since the UK-wide announcement, not just the Glasgow announcement.

Damian Hinds: I am pleased with that clarification, although we had the urgent question on 30 January, after the UK-wide announcement on 26 January, and the Westminster Hall debate in this Chamber on 20 December, as well as a number of oral and written questions—the hon. Gentleman's colleague, the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), suggested more than 100. I have not been counting, but I confirm that it is a substantial number. Of course, we have had the opportunity to meet one to one and with groups as well. I am grateful for this further opportunity to debate these important matters.

On 31 March next year, the DWP's 20-year private finance initiative contract, which covers the majority of the Department's property portfolio of more than 900 sites, will expire. The Department for Work and

[*Damian Hinds*]

Pensions currently occupies about 1.5 million square metres of office space, and these days at least 20% of it is under-occupied. The falling claimant count and the increased use of our online services in recent years means that 20% of the taxpayers' money that the Department is spending on rent is going towards space that is not being used. By paying only for the space we do need and the services required to operate from that, we anticipate saving about £180 million a year for the next 10 years.

The expiry of that contract at the end of March 2018 presents both a unique opportunity and a specific requirement to review the estate. In response to changing demands facing the Department, we have redesigned the estate in a way that delivers better value for the taxpayer. I need to be clear that this is not about reducing services; it is about taking the opportunity to stop spending taxpayers' money on unused space so that we can target money effectively on supporting those in need. We have carefully considered the challenges that we anticipate the Department is likely to face in the future, but the jobs landscape and the way people work has changed significantly in the past 20 years.

As has been mentioned, some 90% of universal credit claims are made online and with more of our services moving online, in common with other organisations, we want to continue making the most of the opportunities that new technologies present to help best meet our claimants' needs.

Louise Haigh: On the roll-out of universal credit, in Sheffield it has been rolled out only to lone individuals with no children. As it expands to cover other types of benefits, the rate will decrease dramatically and, as has been mentioned, the number of interactions is only going in one direction. It is therefore misleading to use that statistic.

Damian Hinds: I am certainly not trying to mislead and I do not think I am misleading. I reassure the hon. Lady that the Department for Work and Pensions, in common with others, does staff and resource planning that takes into account all the different demands that will be made on our services, and that includes the fact that, as a number of Members have mentioned, in universal credit there is the opportunity to work more closely with people, with the workload that that will involve, to encourage more people into work. Of course, that is all part of the plans and not something additional that has not been considered.

The hon. Lady mentioned work with, for example, lone mums on income support. There is also work with partners, as the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) mentioned, and then work with people in work, the self-employed and so on. I should add that some of those offers are in development, and we will adjust and evolve the operation of the offer to optimise it as time goes on. However, of course the assumptions on the amount of workload involved are reflected in the plans.

It is right that we reflect not only the impact of the digital revolution in meeting our claimants' needs but the realities of a more flexible labour market and significant falls in unemployment since 2010. The employment rate is at a new record high: there are more people in work

than ever before. We had the statistics on the unemployment rate come out just yesterday: they have hit a 12-year low. In fact, the last time the unemployment rate was lower than what was announced yesterday was in the mid-1970s. Of course, we always have to consider that things in the world will change. That is also considered in the planning assumptions made by the Department.

Chris Stephens: In terms of employment rates, does the Minister not concede that one result of that is that those who are not in work at the moment have specific circumstances and challenges to overcome? On that basis, that should result in more face-to-face, rather than online, contact.

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman makes a characteristically important and insightful point. Of course, what he says is true. There is a distinction to be made between different claimants and clients in different circumstances, in receipt of different types or benefits—for example, people who are on employment and support allowance are not required to attend jobcentres fortnightly or weekly in the same way as people who are in receipt of jobseeker's allowance.

We want to maximise the opportunities available to all those groups of people, of course. Some of that is about stuff that happens in jobcentres; some of it is not. There are some things that could be done more effectively not in jobcentres than in them, particularly with some people who are further away from the jobs market, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman will recognise.

Heidi Alexander: The claimant count in my constituency went up by 50 in the last month. Although that may be a monthly blip, I am concerned about the overall strength of the London economy moving forward. The Minister talked about the space being under-occupied by a fifth, yet in London he is proposing to close a third of jobcentres. Will he explain that for me?

Damian Hinds: I can. I was going to come on to Lewisham and some of the points that the hon. Lady raised on London, but I will address it now. Overall, the estate is 20% under-utilised, but that does not mean to say that in every individual jobcentre there is exactly 20% of unused space. In terms of the utilisation rates, there is a wide range in individual jobcentres and between cities, when we take the total estate in that city into account. There is no complacency at all about the strength of the labour market in London, Sheffield or Glasgow, or in any other place. In all of the locations that we operate from throughout the United Kingdom, jobcentre staff are focused night and day on helping people to get into work.

In the case of Lewisham, the landlord did not want to re-lease and we believe that 2.1 miles to the Forest Hill location is a reasonable distance to ask people to travel additionally. As the hon. Lady will realise, the London property market is an expensive place to have real estate and there are particular challenges with finding premises in London. We think that the estate we have across London is reasonable in terms of asking people to get around.

Heidi Alexander: The DWP is exploring the possibility of taking on space in Eros House, which is an accessible, central location. If that costs a little bit more, would the

Minister commit to exploring that option, given the additional benefits it can bring?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Lady will understand that I am not going to stand up in Westminster Hall—nor should I—and talk about detailed proposals and plans for sites that she or others may put forward, but we are always open to talking about the range of opportunities. I am happy to follow up with her on the specific points she raises.

In every case where change is proposed, we have sought to minimise disruption and listen carefully to those who might be affected, but as a result of modernisation, the Department's services are demanding fewer people to deliver. It is only right that we consider our options going forward. Delivering a modern and dynamic service to claimants requires modern and dynamic working environments, and that is what we are striving towards as part of our vision for DWP in 2020. Our aim is to maintain and improve the services offered across the country.

We recognise, of course, how important the DWP's staff are to achieving that aim. They are our most valuable resource. It is as a result of their immense effort that the Department is able to provide such a high level of service to our customers. My colleagues and I have been clear that the proposals for the DWP's redesigned estate do not mean a reduction in the number of frontline staff. In fact, we are recruiting and we expect to have more work coaches in every nation and region of the United Kingdom at the end of this process in March 2018 than we do today.

For staff across the DWP network who may be affected by the estate changes, we are currently working through options with each individual, identifying relocation opportunities in the event of closure, but most of all we are listening carefully to understand fully the impact on staff.

John Woodcock *rose—*

Damian Hinds: I am happy to give way, but I was coming to the hon Gentleman's point.

John Woodcock: If the Minister is going to answer this, great, but does he recognise the particular issue of the unfeasibility of Barrow staff relocating, and has he had a chance to examine the proposal that I made when we met to find a cheaper lease on a smaller property in Barrow than Phoenix House?

Damian Hinds: I recognise, of course, the difficult position that staff in Barrow are in and I join the hon. Gentleman in the tribute that he paid to the immensely valuable work that they do. I fully recognise, as he does, the accumulated experience that that group of dedicated staff has. One-to-one conversations will be going on in Barrow and, indeed, in all other locations where there are affected staff. There will be some limited opportunities for staff in Barrow jobcentre, but I am not suggesting that that covers everybody.

The industrial injuries work rightly raised by the hon. Gentleman is moving to Barnsley, which is an existing centre with experience and expertise. Overall for that work, reducing volume demand is projected over the next five years, and we do not expect an impact on service to the customer.

The Department has already made a commitment to support anyone who chooses to relocate in the event of a site closure. That would include the payment of additional travel expenses for up to three years. However, the fact remains that the Department has significantly more capacity across its network than is needed to serve the needs of our customers, even allowing, of course, for a sensible margin. It is imperative that we strive towards more modern and dynamic delivery methods.

Although there is no statutory requirement for consultation on the estate changes to jobcentres, we are conducting consultation on all proposed closures of jobcentres that fall outside what are known as the ministerial criteria. It is not unreasonable to expect claimants to travel to an office that is within 3 miles, or 20 minutes by public transport, of their existing jobcentre. Where a proposed move is outside those criteria, we have chosen to consult publicly both stakeholders and claimants to ensure that the full implications of the closure are considered before we make a final decision. To enhance the profile of such consultations, we have written to local stakeholders and have distributed leaflets and put up posters at affected sites. We have undertaken public consultation where we think the proposals may have a significant effect on claimants. The objective is to ensure that the effects of our proposals are fully considered before any final decisions are made, and I welcome the engagement and responses that we have had from local stakeholders.

We have had a total of 290 responses from across the three sites in Glasgow. Those include responses from claimants, Members of Parliament, including some present here, interested third-party organisations and the wider public. Alongside taking into account the views of a range of stakeholders via consultation, I have met a number of fellow Members of Parliament to discuss how proposed changes to the estate will impact at local level. I will be considering the feedback to all the public consultations and I reiterate to hon. Members that these are genuinely proposals at this stage. When we make final decisions on the design of our estate, we will do so with all the feedback that we have had in mind. That may include considering additional options for outreach or indeed something wider—nothing is off the table at this stage.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: To allow two minutes for the hon. Gentleman's colleague, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West, I had better not.

When a jobcentre closes, the Department has a comprehensive set of outreach and support measures in place to support claimants in accessing the services they need. We embrace closer working with local organisations and support outreach activity at community and partner facilities, including local authorities across the country. That allows work coaches and partner organisations to support the shared needs of claimants. By working with a range of partners, including local authorities, we are able to expand the range and offer of our services.

We respond to personal circumstances. For claimants who are unable to attend a jobcentre due to their vulnerability or the complexity of the transaction required with the Department, we have robust procedures in

[*Damian Hinds*]

place, including home visits and maintaining a claim by post. Travel expenses are refundable under certain circumstances, including where claimants are required to attend a jobcentre more frequently than fortnightly. Claimants can also choose to attend an alternative jobcentre to the one allocated to them if the jobcentre they have been allocated is not the closest or least costly for them.

I touched briefly on Lewisham. On Sheffield, there has been a consultation. The proposal is that Sheffield would better utilise space at Cavendish Court, which is currently only 45% utilised. Eastern Avenue is 74% utilised, but the move would not work in reverse because of the different configurations and sizes of the buildings, and Cavendish Court and Bailey Court are respectively 4.4 miles and 4.7 miles away.

The Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), spoke about partnership and outreach. I entirely agree about the need for partnership and for continuing to enhance it; the West Dunbartonshire employability hub is a particularly good example of that. As I mentioned, we are always keen to do more and to discover such opportunities, and that includes close working with Skills Development Scotland and others.

The proposed changes are the result of careful analysis and planning. While I appreciate hon. Members' concerns about the proposed closures, and again thank the hon. Member for Glasgow South West for securing this debate, the rationale for the proposals is clear. We are working towards a more modern, dynamic estate. This will ensure that we continue to have sufficient flexible capacity to deliver the best services we can to our customers. It is important to stress again that all the specific changes to the estate that have been raised in this debate are still only a set of proposals, and we are continuing the consultation process with our staff to assess how each might be affected. I want to reiterate that in the event that co-location or closures are required, we expect that to have no impact on the excellent services we continue to provide to customers across the country.

4.28 pm

Chris Stephens: May I first apologise to you Mr Walker? So keen was I to raise this issue that I forgot to refer the House to the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my position as chair of the PCS parliamentary group. I apologise for that.

A number of issues have not yet been answered. There is the question of the review criteria. I am clear, as are many hon. Members, that all 78 sites that were earmarked for closure should have been subjected to a full public consultation. The reason why is that the equality impact issue is still outstanding; there is no equality impact assessment for disabled people or the black and minority ethnic community, among others. The economic impact will certainly be hard on many areas; the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) identified that, and made an excellent point on industrial injury benefit. There is also the workforce impact; we have a written answer that says that the DWP expects 750 staff posts to go. If it is hiring staff and letting 750 posts go, I suspect that there will be an employment tribunal at some stage.

We need to make sure that this is done with the correct information, and not wrong and inaccurate information. I ask the Minister to listen to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) about parliamentary scrutiny going forward, and to make sure that we deal with this issue on the Floor of the House. Certainly, if the Minister makes announcements, we expect that to be on the Floor of the House and not sneaked through in a written statement on a Thursday or Friday, or before a recess.

I thank you, Mr Walker, and thank all hon. Members for taking part in this important debate.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Thank you, colleagues. I hope you all have a productive Friday and weekend.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Jobcentre Plus office closures.

4.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 16 March 2017

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Tower Hamlets

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): On 17 December 2014, my predecessor, the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, issued specific, targeted directions to the London Borough of Tower Hamlets using his powers under Section 15 of the Local Government Act 1999.

At that time a team of commissioners was appointed to exercise specific functions of the authority. Although initially progress was slow, more recently I have been pleased to return selected functions back to the council. I am now considering the overall progress of the council in anticipation of these directions ending on 31 March of this year.

In line with the council's own expectations, I am considering withdrawing the three commissioners from the Borough and, in support of the recent progress made by the council, maintaining an oversight role through a new general direction. The new direction allows for continued oversight of electoral administration. The Government have invited expressions of interest from local authorities on piloting the use of ID in polling stations in the 2018 local elections. As part of wider steps to strengthen electoral integrity in the Borough, I would welcome Tower Hamlets' participation.

I have received assurances from the Mayor of Tower Hamlets both in his fourth six-monthly report of 20 February, and in person on 27 February, that he is confident the council is now in a position to drive forward and deliver their own improvement agenda.

This view is endorsed by the commissioners in their report of 21 February which I have carefully considered and discussed with them on 27 February.

I am minded therefore to exercise my powers under Section 15 of the Local Government Act 1999 to revoke the direction of 14 December 2014, end the role of commissioners in the council and hand back executive functions to the Executive Mayor with the proviso that the council delivers all outstanding actions in their best value action plan and the setting up of a best value improvement board as outlined in the Mayor's letter of 1 March.

I am minded also to direct the council to provide quarterly reports against their best value action plans for a further 18 months; and at the end of this period to carry out an independent review of delivery. As with all councils, the London Borough of Tower Hamlets must abide by the best value duty.

This is a significant step forward for Tower Hamlets Council—it has made considerable progress over the past few months. I am pleased that the guidance of the commissioner team has played such a material role in putting Tower Hamlets on the right road to allow it to take on its rightful functions.

I am inviting the council to make representations on these proposals, which will be considered as part of my final decision.

I am placing a copy of the documents associated with these announcements in the Library of the House and on my Department's website.

[HCWS543]

HEALTH

NHS Prescriptions, Dental Treatment, and Wigs and Fabric Supports: Charges

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): As at the start of previous financial years, regulations will today be laid before Parliament to increase certain national health service charges in England from 1 April 2017.

The prescription charge will increase by 20p from £8.40 to £8.60 for each medicine or appliance dispensed. To ensure that those with the greatest need, including patients with long-term conditions, are protected we have frozen the cost of the prescription prepayment certificates (PPCs) for another year. The three-month PPC remains at £29.10 and the cost of the annual PPC will stay at £104, allowing unlimited prescriptions within a specified time period. Taken together, this means prescription charges are expected to rise broadly in line with inflation.

Existing arrangements for prescription charge exemptions will remain in place, principally covering those with certain medical conditions like cancer, epilepsy and diabetes, pregnant women and new mothers, children under 16 and anyone over 60, and those on a low income.

As part of a two-year settlement announced last year, the patient charges for NHS dental care in 2017-18 will be as follows:

- a band one course of treatment and urgent treatment will increase by 90p from £19.70 to £20.60;
- a band two course of treatment will increase by £2.40 from £53.90 to £56.30;
- a band three course of treatment will increase by £10.60 from £233.70 to £244.30.

The maximum band three charge is for the approximately 5% of treatments that include items such as crowns or bridges.

Charges for wigs and fabric supports will rise in line with inflation.

Full details of the revised charges for 2017-18 can be found online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-03-16/HCWS539/>

[HCWS539]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Disclosure and Barring Service

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): The 2015-16 annual report and accounts for the Disclosure and Barring Service (HC 451) are being laid before the House today and published on www.gov.uk. Copies will be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS541]

Security Industry Authority

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): The 2015-16 annual report and accounts for the Security Industry Authority [HC 1088] are being laid before the House today and published on www.gov.uk. Copies will be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS540]

Immigration Rules

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today laying before the House a statement of changes in immigration rules [HC 1078].

The changes include a new requirement that individuals over the age of 18, who are applying for entry clearance under the tier 2 general route to work in education, health and social care sectors, must provide a criminal record certificate from any country in which they have

lived for 12 months or more in the previous 10 years. This requirement will also apply to the partner of the applicant and a partner applying to join an existing tier 2 migrant in one of these work sectors.

This is the second stage in a phased implementation of the requirement. It currently applies to individuals over 18 applying for entry clearance under tier 1 to come to the UK as entrepreneurs or investors, and their adult dependents. The Home Office will continue to monitor implementation with a view to extending the requirement to other migrants in the future.

On 24 March 2016 the Government announced two phases of reforms to tier 2, following a review by the independent Migration Advisory Committee. The first phase was implemented on 24 November and the changes being laid today implement the second phase of the announced reforms. The changes also update the codes of practice relating to skilled workers, and make other minor updates to the rules for work routes.

Further changes are being made to amend or clarify other provisions in the immigration rules.

[HCWS542]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 16 March 2017

DEFENCE

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from topical questions to the Secretary of State for Defence on Monday 13 March 2017.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): According to the National Audit Office, even if the defence estate strategy was implemented in full, we would still have an £8.5 billion budget shortfall caused by the deterioration of the estate. Is the strategy fit for purpose?

Mark Lancaster: The strategy is absolutely fit for purpose, and it is based on delivering military capability. Reducing the estate by some 30% means that we have less estate to look after, and that we can reinvest some £4 billion over the next 20 years.

[Official Report, 13 March 2017, Vol. 623, c. 23.]

Letter of correction from Mark Lancaster

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson).

The correct response should have been:

Mark Lancaster: The strategy is absolutely fit for purpose, and it is based on delivering military capability. Reducing the estate by some 30% means that we have less estate to look after, and that we can reinvest some £4 billion over the next **10** years.

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

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